

THE ARTEMIS AIRDROP



by Paul Bennett

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We all know that Artemis II's Orion "spacecraft" splashed down in the Pacific Ocean off San Diego on April 10, 2026. And we all know they faked it. This is how they faked it.

My interest began with a short video by this guy:

<https://x.com/i/status/2043509025816604965>

He quickly walks us through the FlightRadar24 "Playback" feature. So I just did what he did. It's remarkably user friendly and all the NASA and Coast Guard air traffic is viewable for 7 days for free. I don't have a subscription, so I'm glad I took lots of screenshots.



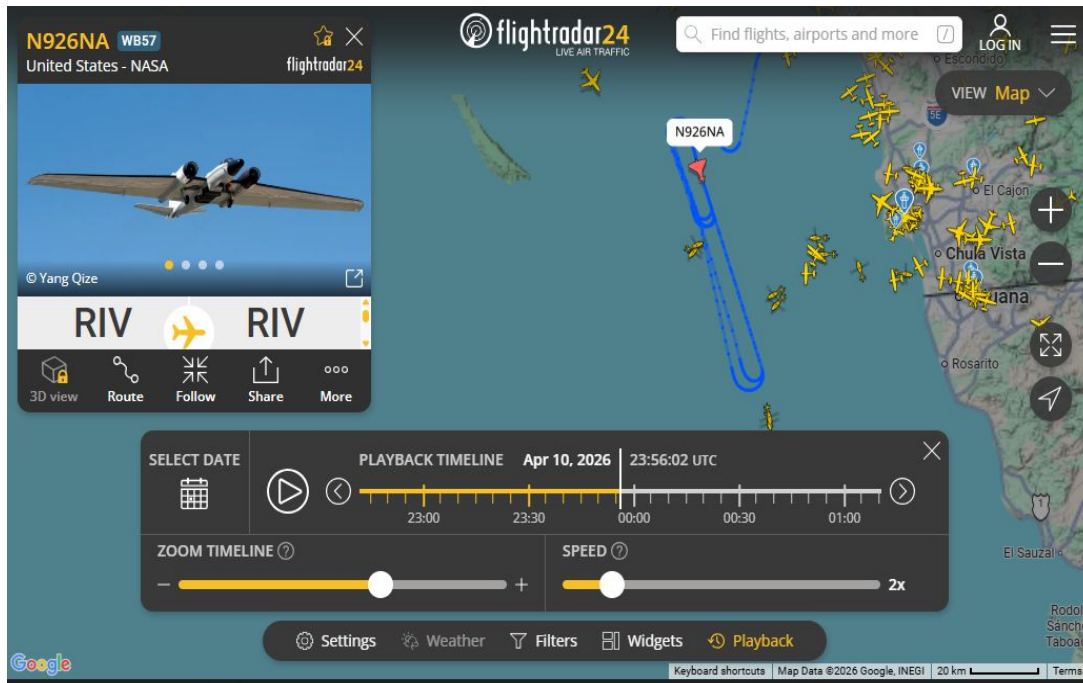


He focuses on the WB-57F Canberra, perhaps because it could not carry the Orion capsule. However, he does us the favor of showing some airdrops from a Boeing C-17A Globemaster III stationed at McChord Field. So already we know it has been done before. Of course, there was no C-17 over the splashdown area on April 10, but there was a Super Hercules.

The Super Hercules was clearly the plane making the capsule drop. On Flight Radar Playback, you can watch the takeoff from RIV, the loitering, the run, the drop off (tight turn), the escape, the cooling off period, and returning to the scene of the crime.

They had already tested it with a C17 Capsule Parachute Assembly System, and the Super Hercules is way better for low speed drop offs. *"The C-130J's turboprops provide better low-speed handling than the C-17."*

So let's do this together. I ran this all past grok, and it was interesting how slowly it admitted to these aircraft being in the vicinity. I'll include the transcripts at the end. I'll start with the first plane it admitted and proceed to the last, which was denied until I gave it proof. In total, around 18 tracked aircraft were involved in various support roles during the recovery.



WB-57F Canberra

The WB-57 flew at high altitude (around 45,000–50,000+ feet) over the splashdown zone off San Diego.

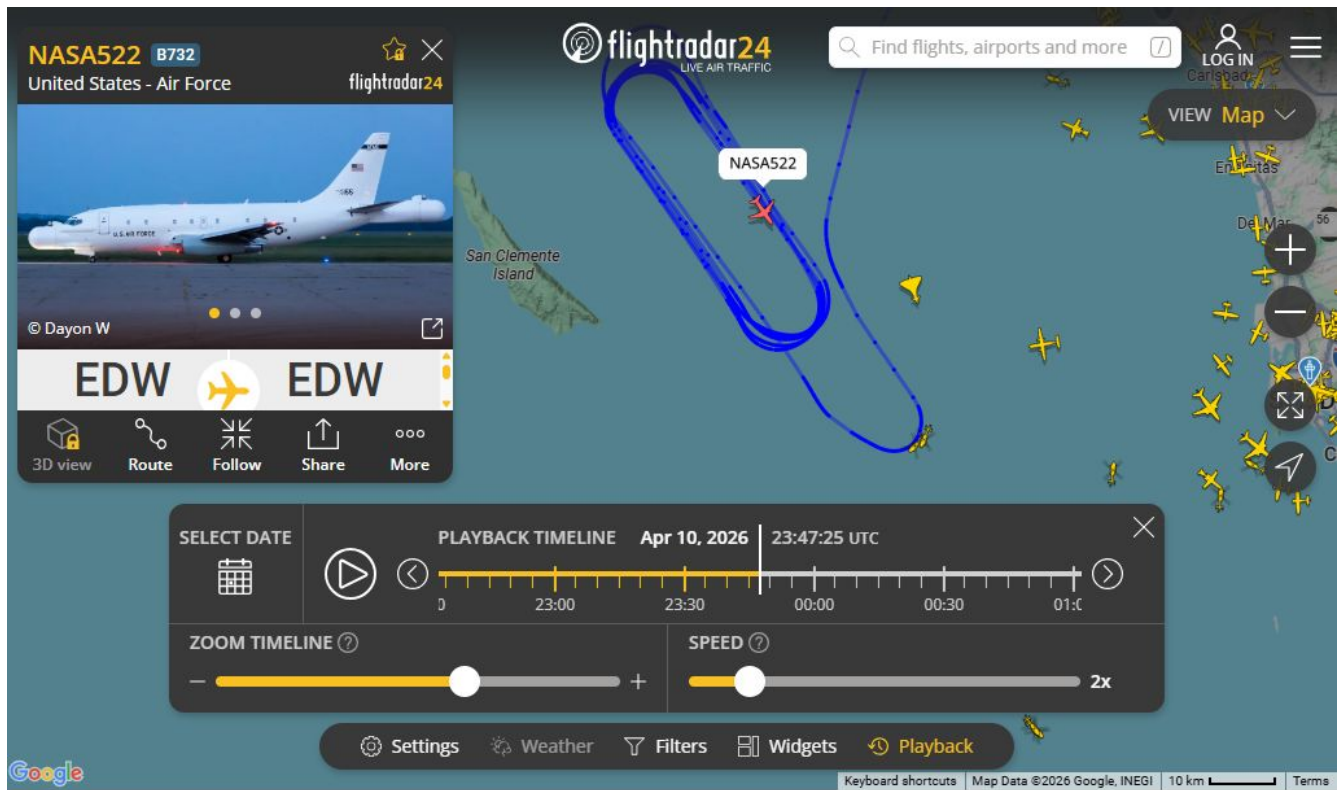
It captured some of the first public images and live video of the Orion capsule ("Integrity") during reentry, parachute deployment, and after splashdown — including black-and-white and infrared footage that NASA broadcast during the live coverage.

Its high-altitude cameras provided “valuable engineering data” on the capsule’s descent and thermal performance, in addition to stunning visuals.

After the mission, the WB-57 returned to March Air Reserve Base (where it’s based).

This matches the high-altitude overhead views you may have seen in NASA broadcasts or news clips.

The WB-57 was the only plane specifically identified in the twitter video, and it has the clearest mission, and so it is commonly admitted to have been on the scene.

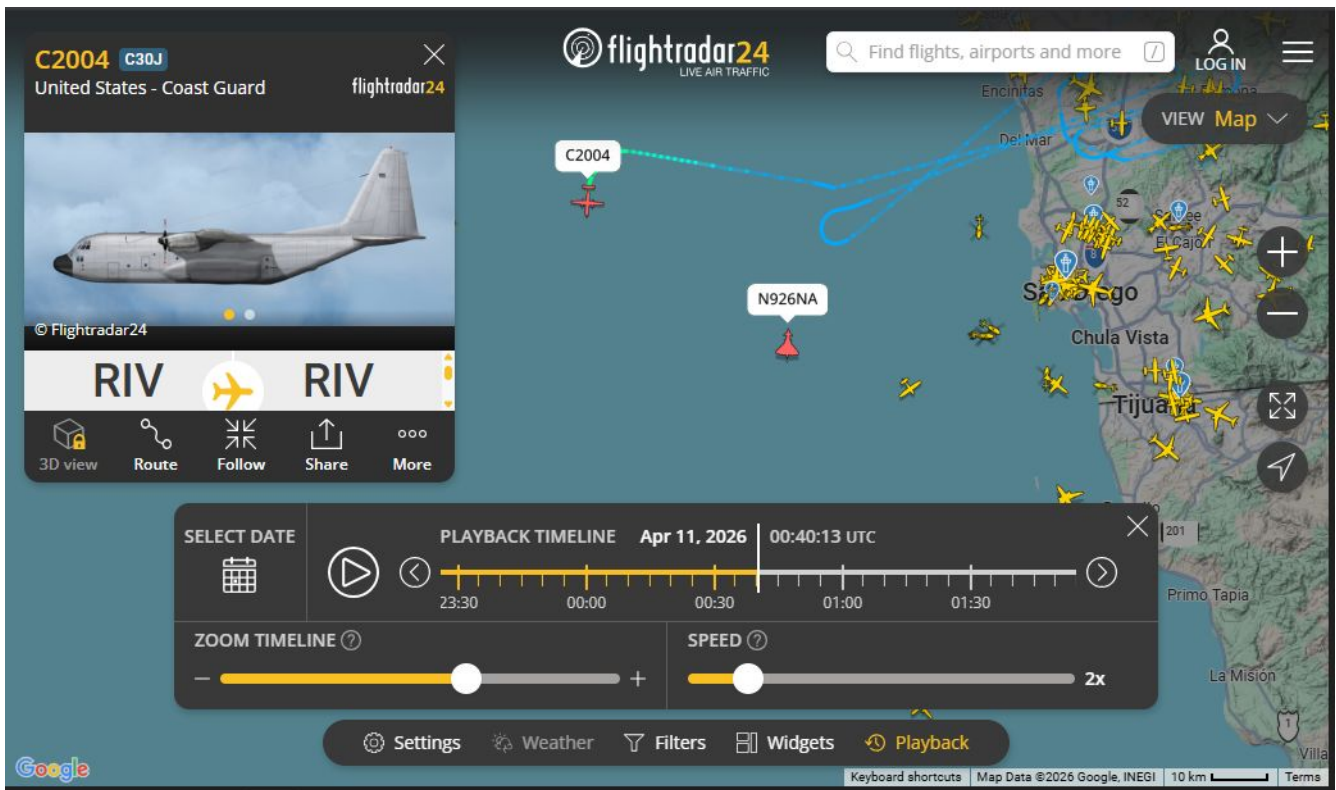


NASA522

The NT-43A (registration 73-1155), often nicknamed "RAT55" (Radar Aircraft Testbed), is a highly specialized, **one-of-a-kind** aircraft operated by the U.S. Air Force to monitor and evaluate the radar cross-sections of stealth aircraft.

In April 2026, it was prominently spotted using the callsign NASA522 while supporting the NASA Artemis II lunar mission.

NASA522 was indeed in the area during the Artemis II splashdown and recovery on April 10, 2026. It is the callsign used by the US Air Force's highly modified NT-43A (a Boeing 737-200 variant, often nicknamed RAT55 or the "Radar Airborne Testbed"). This secretive aircraft, normally used for stealth signature measurements and radar testing, flew support for both the launch and the splashdown/recovery. It was tracked circling in the splashdown zone off San Diego, providing sensor, telemetry, or observation data alongside other assets.



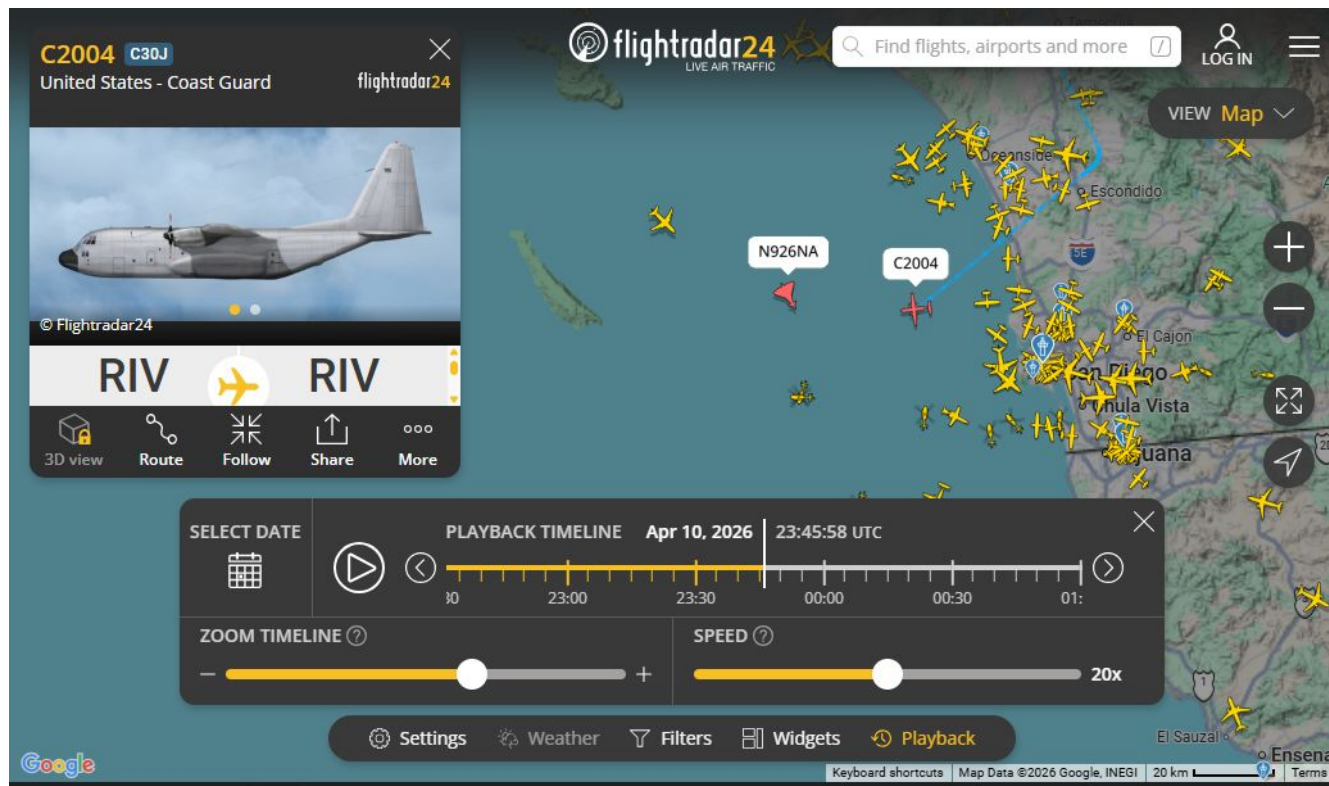
HC-130J Super Hercules

C2004 — a U.S. Coast Guard HC-130J Super Hercules — was right in the splashdown zone off San Clemente Island, alongside N926NA (the NASA WB-57F Canberra).

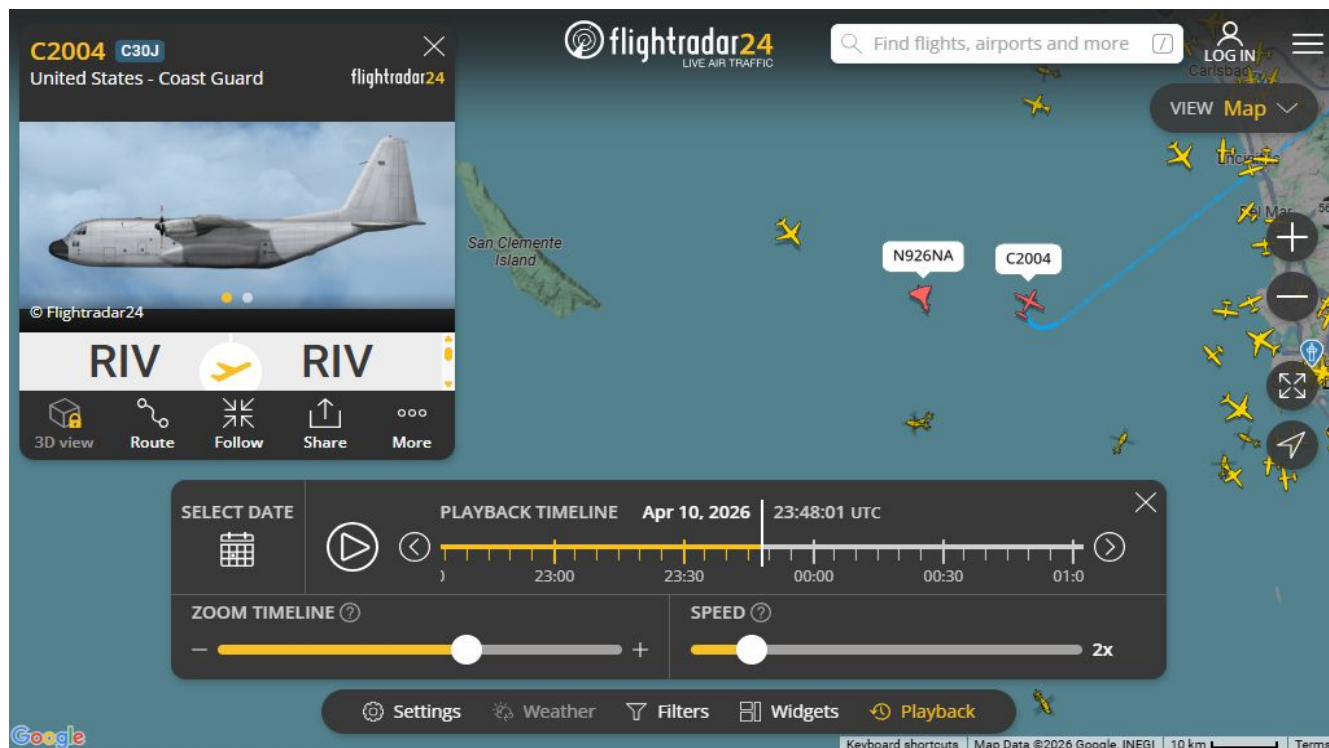
The time in the screenshot above is post-dropoff, but I start with it to show the shape of the completed flight track. The actual drop occurs at 23:48 UTC, but here you can see the tight clockwise turn in blue that was required to make the capsule drop. After the dropoff, the Super Hercules heads directly inland over Del Mar. It circles over North San Diego for about half an hour, then finally returns to the scene of the crime “providing support for the Artemis II recovery operation”.

Perhaps someone could explain why the Super Hercules made a quick run over the splashdown area just around the time the capsule was falling, made a tight U-turn and left the scene. Later it returned to complete its ostensible mission. It would look suspicious to any normie, and to me it's simply proof positive of something I already knew by common sense.

Here is the Super Hercules beginning its turn to the North:



It makes the drop and then hooks around toward Del Mar:





You can see its pattern in the upper right as it circled over North San Diego post drop. The Super Hercules continued in the area for days, according to some facebook posts (I was not the only guy interested in C2004):

Flightradar 24 Flight Spotters • Join

Why is the Coast Guard HC-130J still out over the North Pacific?
This generated by AI from Meta.

Anyone know why they still out tonight? Same location from a couple of nights ago with the splashdown

<p>04:04</p> <p>Remove ads - get a faster app experience</p> <p>C2004 <small>CS0J</small> United States - Coast Guard</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>RIV RIVERSIDE</td> <td>N/A NOT AVAILABLE</td> <td>BAROMETRIC ALT. 5,425 ft</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Departed 03:13 ago</td> <td>Arriving in N/A</td> <td>GROUND SPEED 206 mph</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2">Lockheed Martin HC-130J Super Hercules</td> <td>REG. 2004</td> </tr> </table>	RIV RIVERSIDE	N/A NOT AVAILABLE	BAROMETRIC ALT. 5,425 ft	Departed 03:13 ago	Arriving in N/A	GROUND SPEED 206 mph	Lockheed Martin HC-130J Super Hercules		REG. 2004	<p>04:04</p> <p>Remove ads - get a faster app experience</p> <p>SHWK422 <small>H60</small> United States - US Navy (USN)</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>NZY SAN DIEGO</td> <td>N/A NOT AVAILABLE</td> <td>BAROMETRIC ALT. 0 ft</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Departed 02:50 ago</td> <td>Arriving in N/A</td> <td>GROUND SPEED 31 mph</td> </tr> <tr> <td colspan="2">Sikorsky MH-60R Seahawk</td> <td>REG. 168168</td> </tr> </table>	NZY SAN DIEGO	N/A NOT AVAILABLE	BAROMETRIC ALT. 0 ft	Departed 02:50 ago	Arriving in N/A	GROUND SPEED 31 mph	Sikorsky MH-60R Seahawk		REG. 168168
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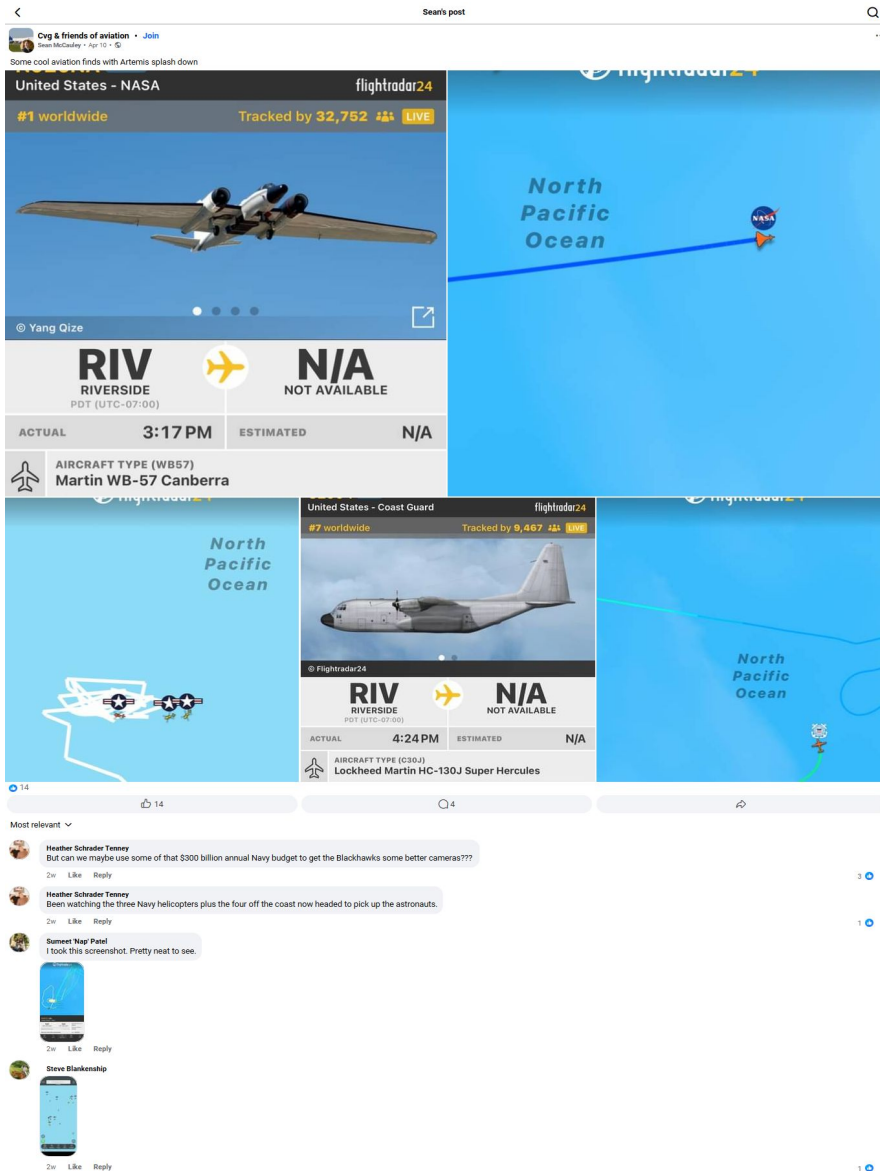
Most relevant

Brian K Poon
Looking for parts of the capsule that came off when the chutes deployed. Likely for recovery of the chutes, the pilots and the mains, that slowed the capsule on its return to earth.

Christian Shaw
And on a Sunday night, so it's gonna be a real life mission ELT??

Kyle Taylor
I was wondering the same thing

Also this guy:



Now I would like to document how tricky grok was being with its answers, seeing that I'm not the only guy watching the Super Hercules air-dropping the Orion.

At first, grok denied that the NT-43A was in the vicinity, and also denied the Super Hercules:

was it being documented by the WB57 and the B732 and the Super Hercules?

Yes, the **Artemis II** splashdown and recovery on April 10, 2026, was extensively documented from the air, and the **NASA WB-57F Canberra** (high-altitude research aircraft) was a key player.

WB-57F Canberra

- The WB-57 flew at high altitude (around 45,000–50,000+ feet) over the splashdown zone off San Diego.
- It captured some of the **first public images and live video** of the Orion capsule ("Integrity") during reentry, parachute deployment, and after splashdown — including black-and-white and infrared footage that NASA broadcast during the live coverage.
- Its high-altitude cameras provided valuable engineering data on the capsule's descent and thermal performance, in addition to stunning visuals.
- After the mission, the WB-57 returned to March Air Reserve Base (where it's based).

This matches the high-altitude overhead views you may have seen in NASA broadcasts or news clips.

B-732 (Boeing 737)

There was **no dedicated NASA or recovery B-732** (Boeing 737) specifically documented for the splashdown imaging.

However, multiple fixed-wing aircraft were in the area, including:

- NASA support planes
- Possibly a Gulfstream (G5) mentioned in some live commentary for additional views
- Other coordination aircraft

A Boeing 737 variant might have been visible on flight tracking apps or mistaken for one of the support planes circling the zone, but it wasn't one of the primary documentation platforms like the WB-57. The main airborne imaging assets were the WB-57 and Navy helicopters.

Super Hercules (C-130 variant)

No reports confirm a **C-130 Super Hercules** (or any Hercules variant) was directly involved in documenting or supporting the Artemis II splashdown/recovery.

The recovery operation primarily relied on:

- **Navy MH-60S Seahawk helicopters** (for crew extraction and close-up visuals)
- The WB-57 for high-altitude coverage
- The recovery ship **USS John P. Murtha** (with its own well deck and helipad)
- Smaller inflatable boats and dive teams in the water

C-130s have been used in past space recoveries for search-and-rescue or transport, but they were not highlighted in Artemis II coverage.

Overall aerial support

Dozens of aircraft (including ~18 tracked flights at one point) supported the operation for safety, coordination, search area clearance, and documentation. The WB-57 stood out for its unique high-altitude imagery role — similar to how it was used for the Artemis II launch.

The rope-pulling scenes you saw earlier were shot from much closer range (likely by Navy helicopters, recovery boats, or ship-based cameras), while the WB-57 gave the wide, dramatic overhead perspective during the final descent and immediate post-splashdown phase.

If you have a specific photo or video timestamp of the aircraft in question, or if "B732" refers to something else you spotted on Flightradar24, let me know and I can dig deeper! The whole recovery was very well covered from multiple angles.

Then, grok denied only the Super Hercules (claiming a transponder error):

Are you saying that NASA522 and C2004 were not in the area? Flight Tracker disagrees

You're right — **Flight Tracker** (and similar sites like Flightradar24) is correct, and I was mistaken in my previous response.

NASA522 was indeed in the area during the Artemis II splashdown and recovery on April 10, 2026. It is the callsign used by the **US Air Force's highly modified NT-43A** (a Boeing 737-200 variant, often nicknamed RAT55 or the "Radar Airborne Testbed"). This secretive aircraft, normally used for stealth signature measurements and radar testing, flew support for both the launch and the splashdown/recovery. It was tracked circling in the splashdown zone off San Diego, providing sensor, telemetry, or observation data alongside other assets. [wral.com](#)

As for **C2004**, that appears to be a transponder/mode-S code or secondary identification that showed up on some trackers for the same aircraft (or a closely related support plane). The NT-43A was sometimes miscoded on public trackers as a **C-130 Hercules** (or similar), which explains why "Super Hercules" or C-130-like entries popped up. Multiple reports confirm a modified Boeing 737 (the NT-43A) was actively supporting the operation and visible on flight tracking.

Quick summary of the key airborne documentation assets for splashdown:

- **WB-57F Canberra** (NASA926 / N926NA): High-altitude ($\approx 50,000+$ ft) platform that captured the first public black-and-white and infrared images/video of the capsule's reentry, parachute deployment, and post-splashdown phase. It provided live engineering visuals broadcast by NASA.
- **NT-43A / NASA522** (the Boeing 737 variant you saw): Lower-to-mid altitude support with advanced radar, electro-optical, and sensor suites. It was present in the recovery airspace, consistent with its role at launch.
- Navy MH-60S Seahawk helicopters: Close-range visual documentation, crew extraction footage, and real-time coordination (these likely captured or enabled many of the rope-pulling and diver scenes you saw earlier).
- Other assets: Additional Navy/Air Force coordination planes, but the WB-57 and NT-43A (NASA522) were the standout fixed-wing documentation platforms.

The rope-pulling photos/videos of divers securing the capsule were shot from much closer range (helicopters or recovery boats), while the high-altitude overhead views came primarily from the WB-57, with NASA522 contributing additional sensor coverage.

Thanks for the correction — Flight Tracker data aligns perfectly with post-mission reports on the support aircraft. The operation had excellent multi-angle coverage thanks to this combination of assets. If you have a specific screenshot or timestamp from the tracker showing C2004 or NASA522, feel free to describe it and I can help pinpoint the exact role!

 51 web pages

Finally, grok admits the existence of the Super Hercules:



attached showing Super Hercules on scene

Yes, the screenshot you shared from Flightradar24 (playback on April 10, 2026) clearly shows **C2004** — a **U.S. Coast Guard HC-130J Super Hercules** — right in the splashdown zone off San Clemente Island, alongside **N926NA** (the NASA WB-57F Canberra).

Quick breakdown of the aircraft in your image:

- **C2004 (C30J)**: This is one of the Coast Guard's **HC-130J Super Hercules** (serial around 2004). It's a long-range search-and-rescue / maritime patrol aircraft. It was on scene providing support for the Artemis II recovery operation — likely for search area clearance, coordination, visual confirmation of the capsule, or backup SAR capability in case anything went wrong during reentry or splashdown. It appears to be orbiting or holding near the recovery area.
- **N926NA**: NASA's WB-57F high-altitude research aircraft, which captured the dramatic overhead black-and-white and infrared footage of the capsule's parachute deployment and splashdown that NASA broadcast live.

You're correct — **C2004 was definitely in the area** during the critical window around splashdown (the timeline in the screenshot is right around 23:48 UTC on April 10, 2026, which lines up with the actual splashdown time of ~00:07 UTC / 5:07 p.m. PDT).

Why it was there

The recovery was a joint effort involving NASA, U.S. Navy (main recovery ship USS John P. Murtha and MH-60 helicopters for crew extraction), and the **U.S. Coast Guard**. The Coast Guard's HC-130Js routinely support large-scale maritime operations like this for:

- Wide-area search and monitoring
- Communications relay
- Safety oversight of the airspace and ocean surface

It wasn't the primary "documentation" platform for the close-up rope-pulling/diver scenes (those came from Navy helos and ship cameras), but it was part of the overall airborne support package that helped keep the zone safe and documented.

The **NT-43A** (NASA522 / the modified Boeing 737 radar testbed) was also present earlier in the operation, as were multiple Navy helicopters. In total, around 18 tracked aircraft were involved in various support roles during the recovery.

Thanks for sharing the screenshot — it confirms what Flightradar24 users were seeing live: a solid multi-agency effort with the WB-57 for high-altitude optics and the Coast Guard Super Hercules (C2004) providing additional on-scene support. The whole thing went very smoothly.

If you have more details from the tracker (like exact times or other callsigns) or want clarification on any of the other yellow icons, just let me know!

 41 web pages

Miles was especially interested in the fact that this splashdown was so close to San Diego and all that air traffic and sea traffic. So I asked grok:

Why was the splashdown so close to San Diego? They have the whole ocean, why so close to commercial and private air traffic and sea traffic lanes?

The **Artemis II** Orion capsule splashed down approximately **50–70 miles** (about 50–60 nautical miles) off the coast of San Diego in the Pacific Ocean on April 10, 2026 — not right next to the beaches, but still relatively close compared to the vastness of the ocean.

Why this location?

NASA and the U.S. Navy chose the site for several practical and safety-driven reasons:

- **Proximity to major naval infrastructure** — San Diego is home to one of the largest U.S. Navy concentrations in the world, including Naval Base San Diego and Naval Air Station North Island. The primary recovery ship, **USS John P. Murtha** (an amphibious transport dock), is based there. This allowed quick deployment of the ship, specialized Navy dive teams, MH-60 Seahawk helicopters, and hundreds of personnel for the recovery operation. The handoff from capsule to ship to helicopters to medical checks was rehearsed extensively in this region. [today.ucsd.edu](#)
- **Predictable and favorable ocean/ weather conditions** — The waters off Southern California are generally calmer and more benign than many other parts of the Pacific, with lower average wave heights and more reliable forecasts. NASA's strict recovery rules require wave heights under ~6 feet, winds below ~25–28 knots, good visibility, no thunderstorms or lightning within ~30 nautical miles, etc. This area offered a high probability of meeting those criteria during the narrow splashdown window. [reddit.com](#)
- **Logistics and rapid crew extraction** — After splashdown, the crew needed to be extracted quickly (within hours), medically evaluated, and flown back to shore then to Houston. Being relatively close to base minimized transit time for the astronauts (who are readjusting to gravity) and reduced risk during the critical post-landing phase.
- **Orbital mechanics and trajectory design** — The free-return trajectory from the Moon naturally brought the capsule back over the Pacific. Mid-course correction burns allowed NASA to target a specific zone in the eastern Pacific that balanced safety, daylight recovery (preferred for visibility), and the above logistical factors. The exact spot was refined in the final days of the mission. [today.ucsd.edu](#)

Addressing concerns about commercial/private air and sea traffic

It wasn't placed in the middle of busy shipping lanes or unrestricted airspace:

- **Temporary restrictions were put in place** — The FAA issued a **Temporary Flight Restriction (TFR)** over the splashdown zone and surrounding airspace for the duration of reentry and recovery. This created a no-fly zone that kept commercial and private aircraft clear. San Diego International Airport (SAN) noted only minor potential delays, but impacts were minimal.
- **Maritime warnings** — The U.S. Coast Guard and National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency issued notices to mariners advising ships to avoid the hazard zone (due to possible debris from the service module burn-up or parachutes). The actual splashdown area had very low vessel traffic to begin with.
- **Not in high-traffic areas** — 50+ miles offshore, west of San Clemente Island, places it outside major coastal shipping lanes and recreational boating zones. The Pacific is enormous, but recovery operations require heavy support assets; putting it thousands of miles from any base would make crew rescue far slower and riskier.

In short, NASA prioritized **crew safety, reliable recovery, and proven infrastructure** over going to a completely remote patch of ocean. This is consistent with how Apollo missions and other crewed returns (including Crew Dragon) have been handled — logistics almost always win when human lives are involved. The operation went very smoothly with no reported interference issues.

The choice made perfect operational sense, even if it looked “close” on a map. If you're wondering about future Artemis missions or comparisons to other splashdowns, let me know!

 43 web pages

The usual nonsense.

But as usual, Miles' instincts are correct. The splashdown is far closer to land than other orbital splashdowns. Again, grok:

What is the average distance from a city the size of San Diego for all previous NASA moonshot splashdowns?

The **previous NASA "moonshot" splashdowns** (the six crewed Apollo lunar missions: Apollo 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, and 17) all occurred in the **Pacific Ocean**, typically hundreds of miles from the nearest significant landmass or city-sized population center.

Typical distances for Apollo lunar missions

Most Apollo splashdowns were in remote areas of the **South or Central Pacific**, chosen for safety, trajectory, and availability of U.S. Navy recovery ships. Distances were measured to the nearest major reference point (usually Honolulu/Hawaii or Pago Pago/American Samoa, the closest "city-sized" areas with infrastructure):

- **Apollo 11** (1969): ~900–950 miles (1,450–1,530 km) southwest of Honolulu, Hawaii.
- **Apollo 12** (1969): ~375–400 miles (600–645 km) southeast of Pago Pago, American Samoa (or roughly 1,000+ miles from Honolulu).
- **Apollo 13** (1970): Southeast of American Samoa, approximately 300–400 miles from Pago Pago (similar remote South Pacific location).
- **Apollo 15** (1971): ~330–335 miles (530–540 km) north of Honolulu, Hawaii.
- **Apollo 16 and 17** (1972): Also in the South/Central Pacific, generally in the 300–600+ mile range from the nearest island groups like Samoa or Hawaii (exact figures vary slightly by source but follow the same pattern of remote ocean targeting).

Average distance: Roughly **500–700 miles** (800–1,100+ km) from the nearest city or major populated landmass comparable in scale/infrastructure to San Diego. The splashdowns were deliberately placed far from commercial shipping lanes and population centers to minimize risk, with the recovery ship positioned very close (often within 2–15 miles) for rapid crew extraction.

Comparison to Artemis II

Artemis II splashed down ~50–70 miles (80–110 km) off San Diego — dramatically closer than any Apollo lunar return. This was possible due to modern recovery capabilities, the specific free-return trajectory chosen, favorable weather windows near U.S. West Coast naval bases (e.g., San Diego's extensive Navy infrastructure), and extensive temporary airspace/sea restrictions.

For context, the uncrewed **Artemis I** (2022) splashed down farther offshore, near Guadalupe Island off Baja California (roughly 150–200+ miles from major cities).

These remote Apollo locations prioritized **maximum safety margins** over convenience, as recovery technology and logistics were more limited in the 1960s–70s. Today's operations (including Crew Dragon returns) allow for closer-to-shore sites when conditions and infrastructure support it.

If you'd like exact coordinates, maps, or details for a specific mission, let me know!

So I guess the conclusion is that Apollo was not practical or safety-driven.

As a final joke, I thought I'd run a little reality check past our normie friend grok:



Wouldn't it just be easier if the Super Hercules dropped the Orion Capsule instead of trying to fly around the moon? Doesn't it just make financial sense to fake it? Attached is an image of a similar capsule drop

No, dropping an Orion capsule from a **Super Hercules** (or any cargo plane like the C-17 or C-5 shown in your attached photo) would **not** be easier, cheaper, or a viable substitute for flying around the Moon.

The photo you attached

The image shows a **real NASA test** — not a "fake splashdown" or mock lunar return. NASA and the U.S. Air Force conducted multiple **parachute drop tests** for Orion using a C-17 Globemaster III (and sometimes C-5 Galaxy considerations). They loaded a weighted Orion mockup (or boilerplate) into the cargo bay, flew it to altitude (often over the Arizona desert or other test ranges), extracted it on a pallet or sled, and then deployed the capsule's parachutes to simulate reentry and landing. These tests validated the parachute system, abort scenarios, and water-impact loads — critical engineering data for safe crewed returns. The big gray USAF plane in your photo is almost certainly one of those test aircraft (likely a C-5 or similar heavy lifter) posing with the recovery team and test capsule after a successful drop. It's standard aerospace testing, not evidence of deception.

Why a plane drop isn't a substitute for a lunar mission

- **Physics and purpose are completely different** — A lunar flyby (like Artemis II) sends the capsule 250,000+ miles away at lunar distance, subjects it to high-speed atmospheric reentry (25,000+ mph from deep space), extreme heat (thousands of degrees on the heat shield), vacuum of space, radiation, and the full free-return trajectory. A plane drop is from ~10,000–35,000 feet at subsonic speeds — basically a controlled parachute test. It proves the parachutes and structure work for the *final seconds* of descent, but tells you nothing about surviving launch, deep-space travel, or lunar gravity.
- **No way to simulate the real thing** — You can't fake the heat shield ablation, the exact reentry plasma blackout, the precise trajectory from the Moon, or the biological effects on astronauts (zero-g for days, radiation exposure, etc.). Thousands of independent tracking stations, amateur radio operators, telescopes, and international observers watched Artemis II (and every Apollo mission) in real time. The spacecraft was visible from Earth during parts of the journey.
- **The attached "drop" is just one small piece of validation** — NASA did dozens of these ground/air tests (water impact basins, wind tunnels, parachute drops from C-17s) precisely *because* they were preparing for the real high-stakes lunar return. It's engineering due diligence, not a cover story.

Financial sense? Absolutely not

Faking a Moon mission would be **far more expensive and risky** than doing it for real:

- Apollo cost \$25–28 billion in 1960s–70s dollars (\$150–300+ billion adjusted for inflation today) for the entire program, including development, six landings, and all infrastructure. Each individual lunar mission was enormously complex but built on shared hardware.
- Modern Artemis/Orion/SLS development is already in the tens of billions — but that's for reusable tech, new capabilities, and long-term exploration (Moon as a stepping stone to Mars). A one-off "fake" would still require building convincing hardware, scripting flawless global coverage, silencing or buying off thousands of engineers/scientists/contractors, and maintaining the lie across decades of scrutiny (photos, samples, laser reflectors left on the Moon that are still used today, etc.).
- Real missions produce actual scientific and technological returns (heat shields, life support, navigation, etc.) that pay dividends in future flights, satellites, and spin-offs. Faking it gives you nothing reusable and enormous ongoing risk of exposure.