

Rush by Air  
"Cold War Transitions: Congo civil  
wars and Swift Strike exercises"

*Billy Higgins*

The second smallest state in the Union, Delaware has three counties – two at high tide say the residents. The middle one of those three counties, Kent, is home to one of the largest United States Air Force bases. During the Kennedy administration, Dover AFB embraced the 1607th Wing of the Military Air Transport Service (MATS). Dover was almost the counterpart to the giant of the Western Transport Air Force (WESTAF), Travis AFB in California. Almost, because headquarters of the Eastern Transport Air Force (EASTAF) was not actually at Dover, but 70 miles up the road at McGuire AFB, New Jersey. The 1607th Wing, however, had some 53 C-124s, and to fly them, three squadrons of aircrew numbering between them some 330 pilots, 170 navigators, 240 flight engineers, and 139 loadmasters.<sup>1</sup> Two squadrons with 27 C-133s and crewmembers were based at Dover, too, along with “tenant” units of SAC equipped with B-52s and ADC equipped with F-102s and F-106s.

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<sup>1</sup>*History of 1607<sup>th</sup> Air Transport Wing, Heavy*, June 1964 – December 1964. These are figures are for that particular period of time, buy typify the unit strength from 1954 through 1964.

Coming to an operational unit after two years of Air Training Command presented a new life, where real work meant real opportunities to serve the country and see the world. Here, neophyte transport navigators checking into their squadron quarters would get a guided tour of their operational airplane. The flight line buzzed and roared with airplane activity. At Dover, which had that diverse mission, the C-124s parked in rows near the terminal impressed with their stately size and perfect alignment. Barely visible at the end of the field, the SAC tenant unit had its B-52s arrayed on its separate ramp that veered directly onto the runway in case of a scramble. At the supply store, navs were issued brown leather nav kits and flight suits on which they would sew MATS and squadron patches. Plague shots and passports were obtained, necessary for the global mission of the C-124 crews.

A priority order of business upon arrival was to find living quarters. On the sprawling base there were plenty of converted barracks in which to house bachelor officers. Married officers could obtain a housing allowance with which to rent a house or apartment. The largest in Dover was named the Caesar Rodney Apartments. Caesar Rodney is considered to be, in Delaware at least, a founding father. As presented by teachers in local elementary schools, Rodney rode the seventy miles from Dover to Philadelphia in a driving rainstorm arriving on July 1, 1776, to break the tie in Delaware's three man representation at the Continental Congress, using the phrase, "I vote for Independence." Rodney did his part in the American Revolution and stayed active afterwards. He died in 1784, though, before the Constitutional Convention. His legacy to the new United States lived on and Delaware did become the first state to ratify the new Constitution as it emerged from the Convention in 1787 earning its right to the nickname, "The First State," which still appears as a motto on automobile license tags. Just a few miles from the Caesar Rodney Apartments, is the capitol of Delaware, a colonial brick building fronted by the Dover Green, where in 1962 a whipping post stood on the corner of the grounds and a repeated misdemeanor offender was sentenced to the lash. He was never tied to the post for administration, however, another court interceding to halt what most people thought of as over-the-top punishment.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The last man sentenced to a lashing was in 1963, but it was not carried out.

Dover had prominent town life features such as a weekly market for the conservative Mennonite farmers who came to town in their enclosed one-horse buggies. Delaware rural roads have a lane for horse traffic and Dover had a designated parking area for the conveyances. Bearded men with wide brimmed hats, plain clothes, and females wearing no makeup, hair in buns covered by a white cap and floor length dresses talked earnestly with each other, dealing with issues in a world much different than that going on at the air base a few miles to the south.



Rehoboth Beach thirty miles down the coast from Dover boasted fresh caught seafood and the Bottle & Cork (“World’s Greatest Rock ‘n Roll Bar”) where college kids, young officers from Dover, staffers from inside the beltway, and Philadelphia secretaries mingled in the summer to converse, dance, do the limbo, and maybe watch a sunrise from the beach.

Near Dover AFB, a village, Kitts Hummock, fronts Chesapeake Bay which is protected from crashing ocean waves by a peninsula of land occupied by the state of New Jersey eighty miles across the bay toward the rising sun. That bit of shelter creates a special habitat

occupied by, among other sea creatures, something called a horseshoe crab, because it looks like the underside of a horse's hoof. It consists mainly of a large soft shell and a six inch spike of a tail that it can erect so that it points straight up, which it will do as it scrunches down to cover its body in the beach sand. This crab has no edible meat and if a beach comber or swimmer happens to step on the spike, well, it feels like stepping on a twenty penny nail. Yet it is a unique form of life requiring this unique habitat. Edible crabs, along with clams, abound in Delmarva.

Bars and taverns strung out along the beach highway have frequent clambakes to go along with their shuffleboard tournaments. Pucks are called quakes in Delaware, further distinguishing the small state which in 2008 saw its favorite son, Joe Biden, elected to the vice-presidency of the United States, on the ticket with Barrack Obama, the first African American to be elected to that high, precious office, and commander in chief of the U.S. military.

In the 1960's, C-124 crew members arriving at Dover for the first time from Air Training Command where they had lived and worked in the spacious states of Texas and California are immediately struck by the nearness of everything around Dover. Washington, D.C. lays just two hours away, New York City four. Philadelphia, Baltimore, Atlantic City are in easy driving distances. Although nice to think about, such get-a-ways for Air Force officers were rare, as flying schedules, training, and duty assignments made for long work weeks. Pilots seemed to spend every waking hour studying, simulating, staying current, or checking out on some skill in the plane. Navigators had some of these duties, too, but for the most case, time each month was spent away from home station on a flying mission. Rated officers were capped at 330 flying hours for a quarter and typically that meant about 100 hours per month which translated to about 15 – 16 days out of thirty on a trip. Most of those C-124 trips from Dover were directed to Europe.

A priority purpose of the 1607th mission was to keep NATO allies supplied with material. In 1960, the U.S. Army had more than a half million soldiers and airmen in Europe. Although these American soldiers were not all supplied by air or even mostly by air, with the crisis of the blockade and subsequent Berlin Airlift came the recognition of the need for heavy transport airplanes in case other means failed. To

keep the air supply channels open and lubricated, many missions were flown seemingly for that purpose. Apocryphal stories were told about one C-124 delivering a single I-beam to an ally and the second C-124 on loading it for the trip back home.

In 1954, the newly created the 1607th at Dover AFB received its first C-124s, then fresh and un-fatigued. In the same year, Globemaster IIs from another base, the 62nd Troop Carrier Wing at McChord AFB, carried French troops from their home stations in Europe to Dien Bien Phu where the great battle for French Indochina – Vietnam - was occurring. Perhaps the reinforcements were too little, too late, but a major lesson learned was the reliability and power of the C-124s in that all thirteen of them assigned made the 22,000 nautical mile circumnavigation of the globe successfully in an average flying time of one hundred nineteen hours actualizing a new day for troop transport where a full division could be deployed from thousands of miles away in a very short span of time.<sup>3</sup> The Globemaster with its dogged reliability and its voluminous cargo bay won over air strategists. Consequently, numerous airlift and Atlantic crossings were in store for these huge airplanes of MATS especially those of the 1607th extending by the mid-sixties, to all airlift wings when C-124s were landing daily in South Vietnam. Thus, the heyday of the C-124 was dawning.

Dover C-124s, as much as any base and any transport airplane, represented Air Force responses to the realities of 1961-1963, that is the commitments of the Kennedy administration to a military designed for counter-insurgency actions rather than nuclear warfare, the U. S. Army's commitment to Air Cavalry units dependent on helicopter transport to fire zones, and to counter the increasing aggression of North Vietnam toward South Vietnam, a hot spot ten thousand miles from the United States.<sup>4</sup> While military jet airlifters were on the drawing board and some

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<sup>3</sup>Frederick A. Johnsen, *Lockheed C-141 Starlifter*. (North Branch, Minnesota: Specialty Press Publishers, 2005), 6.

<sup>4</sup>In the campaign of 1960, Kennedy articulated his ideas of a new force to meet Soviet challenges other than what had been conventional wisdom, that is reliance on nuclear weapons to deter aggression. Some thinking during the later days of the Eisenhower administration concerned the option of limited nuclear warfare to confront limited-war situations. See General Frederic H. Smith, Jr., "Nuclear Weapons and Limited War," *Air University Quarterly Review*, 12, 1

C-130A Hercules turbo-prop were already carrying out its missions, at that time the Globemaster II size, operational numbers, trained crews and maintenance proved ready, willing, and able to meet the seminal demands of the American Century.



*Dover's first C-124 arrived in 1954. Photo courtesy of the Air Mobility Command Museum, Dover AFB, Delaware.*

While not diminishing the airlift missions needed by NATO, NORAD, and humanitarian causes, the 1607th began, mostly through gigantic exercises, the tasks of training its C-124 crews for the new army and the new national strategy of containing Communism. Formation flying, paratroop drops, short field landings, and engine running off loads signaled a day when airlifting counter-insurgency forces to far-

away places, like Vietnam, and landing them in forward positions would be on the menu.<sup>5</sup>

Dover AFB was perfectly situated to combine the missions. With field conditions preferred by giant airplanes, an elevation of less than thirty feet above sea level, 10,000 foot runways, and convenient routes to major sea ports and the cities of the eastern seaboard, Dover had the advantages and features for sustainable giant air plane operations.

Local people were and are quite aware of the giants, sometimes in three to nine ship formations, as they plied the skies above Delaware, but never did the odd-looking Globemaster develop a romanticism that attached itself to the awesome bombers or the sleek fighter airplanes sharing those same skies. Unfair maybe since Dover C-124s carried nuclear weapons, too, albeit just for transporting and always safety armed, but nevertheless real atomic bombs. On one ill-fated occasion, a C-124 lifted off from Dover with three nuclear weapons and one nuclear capsule aboard. The fissionable core was not installed in the bombs which was indeed a fortunate safeguard on this particular mission. Soon into the flight, the Globemaster lost number one and number two engines on the port wing of the airplane. To maintain altitude for a return to an emergency field, the aircraft commander ordered the jettison of cargo through the freight elevator well. The first weapon left the plane at 4,500 feet altitude and the second was jettisoned at 2,500 feet. No detonation occurred even as the bombs hit the surface of the water, the impact of which no doubt damaged them. They evidently sank instantly to the bottom. Immediate search efforts could recover neither weapon nor any debris from the depths of the ocean. The C-124 landed safely at an Atlantic City airport.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Dover AFB, *The Airlifter*, January 1961, Vol. 6, No. 1, page 1.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Defense, "Narrative Summaries of Accidents Involving U. S. Nuclear Weapons, 1950-1980," 9. Another incident involving a nuclear weapons and a C-124 occurred on July 6, 1959 after the plane on a nuclear weapon ferrying mission crashed on takeoff from Barksdale AFB, Louisiana.

The ensuing fire destroyed the airplane and the nuclear weapon that was aboard without its exploding. Safety devices prevented the detonation but the accident did result in a limited amount of radioactive contamination in the immediate area. *Ibid.*, 17. Another C-124 was involved in a nuclear accident

Even with some highly exotic and newsworthy uses of Dover C-124s - the world-wide tour by a Globemaster exhibiting the Mercury capsule piloted by astronaut John Glenn made newspaper headlines - the airplane seemed irrelevant. But how wrong that impression would be demonstrated very soon in Africa.

In the summer of 1960, a United Nations peace-keeping force arrived in the Congo, much of it transported by Dover Globemasters. This unfolding civil war signaled a departure from John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State in the Eisenhower administration, and the limited response inherent in the Dulles' "Massive Retaliation" strategy to deter aggression. Emerging threats were not conventional, however, and could not be properly met with a foreign policy that relied upon SAC to destroy an enemy if they attacked the U.S. or one of its allies or clients. "Ike's Bluff" as it has been termed, was to stare down any unruly behavior, anywhere, especially if complicated by the chief adversary, the USSR. But times, they were "achangin!"

The Greek Civil War in 1948, had prompted the Truman Doctrine in which the president had specified that U. S. power would be used to stop the spread of Communism. The Marshall Plan, a corollary, had sought to use money as the instrument to prevent that spreading, thus originating U. S. foreign aid programs. Harry Truman ran for reelection in 1948 and won a surprising uphill battle against Republican challenger New York governor Thomas Dewey. Dixiecrats, wildcatting Southern Democrats irate over the military integration order by the president, fielded their own candidate, Strom Thurman, taking many of the South's Democrat electoral votes away from Truman.<sup>7</sup> Dewey was formidable in his own right and was widely predicted to win the election over the divided Democrats. Truman, whose prospects for victory looked dim, campaigned hard and won the election anyway.

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at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, on October 11, 1965. Minor contamination found on the airplane which was restored to service after normal cleaning. *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>7</sup>A tradition started with C-17 Globemaster III's to name them after specific American people as the U.S. Navy does with its aircraft carriers. One C-17 is named The Spirit of Strom Thurman and is stationed with the 437th Airlift Wing, Charleston AFB.



The American people decided, perhaps, that Truman's experience was the best bet between the candidates at this crucial time when the U.S. – U.S.S.R. alliance that had defeated the Nazis was coming apart. A Communist coup in Czechoslovakia deposed popular president Edward Benes who died in September after he resigned in the face of Soviet troop intervention. The Berlin Airlift that started on June 26, 1948 continued until May 1949. These threats led to meetings to prepare for mutual defense by Western European countries in 1948, a forerunner to the inclusion of the United States and Canada in forming the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the treaty signed in April 1949.<sup>8</sup> With bipartisan agreement, NATO would insure globalization of United States aims and responses.

While that provided a measure of comfort for our European allies, their nerves were still frayed by the monumental Red Army facing them across the "Iron Curtain." If attacked, NATO forces, small in comparison, would be overwhelmed by the Red Army which would, of course, bring on the spread of Communism. U.S. troops in Europe formed not a stout line of defense, but only a "trip wire" which if triggered would result in "the launch." With Western Europe at stake, a launch would most definitely occur. That strategy preoccupied the Eisenhower administration that followed, and massive retaliation developed as a national strategy. But that strategy could not account for confrontations that were starting to occur in the developing world.

In the late 1950's and 1960's independence movements in former colonies broke out around the world. In African countries, violent conflict between leaders and groups vying for political power often accompanied wars of liberation, even after independence had been won from the imperialistic European powers who, with the Berlin Conference of 1889, had systematically divided up the "Dark Continent" between them. King Leopold of Belgium staked a claim to the interior of sub-Saharan Africa as his private possession. It was called the Belgium Congo.

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<sup>8</sup>The treaty was signed in Washington, D. C. by Dean Acheson, Truman's secretary of state, and ratified in July by the Republican majority U. S. Senate. The original NATO members were Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, France, United Kingdom, Portugal, Italy, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, Canada, and the United States. Greece and Turkey joined in 1952. As in the Hegelian view, every thesis gets its antithesis, so the Soviet Union formed the Warsaw Pact in opposition to NATO.

The Congo, a vast land in the middle of the great continental plateau of Africa, is bisected by the equator and is one of the hottest and rainiest places on earth. Its river, the Congo, carries an immense volume to the sea, and ninety percent of the population lives along the river which acts as a great inland artery. Beyond the river settlements stretched enormous unbroken rain forests. But, unlike the Amazon, the Congo does not provide ocean vessel access from its mouth in the Atlantic into the interior. Geography prevents that in the form of two hundred foot escarpments that appear at the edge of the plateau 100 miles inland from the coast preventing further passage. Ship-borne cargo from the sea cannot enter the Congo basin, the physical geography of the continent thus isolating central Africa and its people. Imports from outside reach inland markets in the country via bearers or by air transport.

As Belgium slowly and reluctantly granted measures of independence, the Congo, colonized for eighty years, and held back by geography and imperialism, saw no unified government emerge. In June, 1960, Congo became independent, but with no consensus and rivals to the elected government gearing up for armed conflict in pursuit of their aims, the super powers began to see opportunities for getting a foot in the door. In Africa, the situation was complicated and both sides settling on the use of surrogates rather than nuclear threats to advance their interests. In effect, this was a test for Khrushchev's new theory that the Soviet Union could compete with the United States and win – my vas pakhoronim - in emerging African states such as Egypt, and now the Congo, without setting off massive retaliation.<sup>9</sup> Congo like many other former European colonies was not under the defense umbrella of NATO which, with U.S. insistence, adopted at its founding charter a clause excluding territories below the Tropic of Cancer.

With Belgium administrators and military officers staying put in the former colony, much was about to go wrong. Patrick Lumumba,

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<sup>9</sup>An offhand remark by the Soviet premier on November 18, 1956, in Poland, was interpreted by the U. S. public as a threat burying us under rubble with a nuclear bombardment. The wise-cracking Nikita might have meant that, he never explained the remark, but more likely it was an ominous translation of indomitable peasant will more closely resembling "I will be at your funeral."

the elected Prime Minister and a charismatic socialist, asked for United Nations assistance as he faced a serious threat of secession in Katanga province from his rival, Moïse Tshombe. Tshombe, a Methodist and former businessman – what’s not to like? Western diplomats might have thought” - had hired white mercenaries, led by former Belgian officers, with which to battle Lumumba’s Congolese government troops. Noting that chaos was about to descend in central Africa, UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld responded to Lumumba’s request by sending a substantial international military force to the Congo to intervene in the crisis. The United States and the Soviet Union agreed to provide the airlift.



*UN troops loading on a Dover AFB C-124 at Elizabethville, Congo, 1961*

While the Russian transports were slow to materialize, by January 1961, as many as nineteen C-124s and C-130 Hercules were providing help to beleaguered people in the Congo. Orders were to assist the evacuation of Europeans, mostly Belgians but some four hundred Americans worked or served in the Congo as well. Dover AFB C-124s took on the lion’s share of the airlifting, flying 9,000 troops from nine countries and 4,500,000 pounds of cargo picked up from nine airfields stretching from Ireland to Pakistan in an operation initially dubbed Operation Safari, the name soon being changed to Operation

New Tape, out of kindness one supposes. Globemasters carried troops in and out of the Congo, including a contingent of 500 United Arab Republic soldiers in Equator province.<sup>10</sup>

Katanga had one jet fighter, piloted by a Belgian that ruled the skies, “playing a key role in the fighting” until Swedish fighters were deployed by the U.N. force and gave protection to ground forces of Lumumba.<sup>11</sup> Showing the level of international cooperation achieved by Hammarskjold, India sent fighter planes to do air battle and give air support for United Nations troops as well. Katanga was worth fighting for since within it lay uranium and vast copper deposits making it resource rich. Copper had been mined and exported from there since the first millennium. The sixties were the beginning of affluent years in the United States and the housing boom needed copper imports driving the market upward. Indeed, over the next twenty years, world copper production doubled.<sup>12</sup> Oil was still cheap on the world markets, copper was not.

The warring factions trumped Hammarskjold’s indecisive efforts to use the multi-national force in any meaningful way to stabilize the elected government which caused a desperate Lumumba to request support from the Soviet Union. This appeared to reduce Congo independence into a minor league version of the Cold War where battles occurred between Maoist factions and those who were not Marxists each supported but not controlled by one of the super powers. “Not controlled” was a key to the rise of a dictatorial regime uncommitted to either side, but brutal and exploitive in its own way.

The airlift to the Congo logged 40,000 flight hours, most of that in the first year and a half when C-124s from the 1607th were virtually

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<sup>10</sup>*New York Times*, January 27, 1961, 4.

<sup>11</sup>*New York Times*, September 22, 1961, 5.

<sup>12</sup>World copper production went from 4 million tons in 1960 to 7.2 million tons in 1980. From 1980 to 2010, production again doubled to 16 million tons. United States Geological Survey, *Minerals Yearbook*, 2012.

the only MATS aircraft used in New Tape.<sup>13</sup> From European bases such as that in Chateauroux, France, isolated airways to Leopoldville (now Kinshasa) took Globemasters twenty-two flight hours. Many missions bound for the Congo stopped over at Wheelus AB, the American-operated field in Libya. Navigators flight planned in the base ops there using incomplete charts of the African continent much of which in the pre-satellite era remained as uncharted as in the days of Henry Stanley. ONCs depicted most of the massive Sahara Desert in white, meaning that there was scant navigational knowledge of an area that is equal in size to the lower 48 states. Celestial navigation over the Sahara was impeded by sand storms that reached flight levels. Radio beacons as well as airport towers operated only during day light hours, if then.”<sup>14</sup> A generalized preflight briefing for the intrepid 1607th crews that carried troops and material to this war zone in the Third World was fly south for ten hours and pick up the Leopoldville RDF.<sup>15</sup>

Dover crews flew across the continent mostly VFR which offered wonderful views of the most spectacular landscapes and wildlife in the world and landed on legs with troops or material at places like Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, (elevation 7,000 feet), Entebbe, Uganda, Khartoum, Sudan, and Leopoldville in the Congo. Pakistani troops carrying field packs and wearing their unit berets boarded at Karachi with carbines and automatic weapons. Crews bunked in the airplane, in a vacated dormitory at Lovanium University in Leopoldville, at the Lake Victoria Hotel, and once at least in a private villa of a Belgium family so recently and quickly evacuated that dirty dishes were still in the sink. Aircrew members wore civvies and were sustained nutritionally over the course of a typical twenty day TDY by the standbys: a can of Beanie

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<sup>13</sup>Harry Heist, “The Flying History of the 1607<sup>th</sup> Air Transport Wing (H), Dover Air Force Base. An undated pamphlet available through the Air Mobility Command Museum. Heist is the Museum archivist.

<sup>14</sup>Col. David M. Sibbald, “Abandoning the Congo,” *Hanger Digest*, Vol 3, No 2 (April 2003): 6.

<sup>15</sup>Cecil Brownlow, “Congo Airlift Provides Tough Support Test for USAF,” *Aviation Week* 73, 7 (August 15, 1960): 32-34. Digitized by the International Studies Association, “Background on World Politics,” 4, 3 (Autumn 1960): 95 and accessible through JSTOR using this link: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3013739>

Weenie, dessert of Oreos, and topped off with a Winston or Marlboro cigarette.<sup>16</sup>

As one C-124 pilot told it, “A crucial navigation beacon, Lake Awasu, between Stanleyville and Addis, was never on the air . . . finally we located the village and spotted the antenna and the shack which housed the generator. We buzzed the village and even dropped a note, but no joy. It finally came on the air the day we left for home and we later learned that to turn it on, a soldier was dispatched from Addis on a nine-day trek mounted on a donkey.”<sup>17</sup> Intrepid was not strong enough to describe one incident in Leopoldville when Congolese troops boarded a C-124 and marched the crew off the airplane at gun point. Some were jailed and three were struck repeatedly with rifle butts. Eventually released, the crew received the Air Force Commendation Medal and the three who had taken the physical beatings were awarded the Purple Heart, perhaps the first time that had occurred in Sub-Saharan Africa. Anti-aircraft incidents occurred as well. In December 1961, a Globemaster II was hit by enemy ground fire on landing approach to Elisabethville, the capital of Katanga province. The C-124 landed safely even though the gunfire put one engine out of commission.<sup>18</sup>

Lumumbu was murdered in 1961, after being captured, held, and beaten unmercifully by Congolese soldiers in the cargo compartment of an airlifter flown by an Australian crew. By 1965 pro-Western Moise Tshombe had been exiled. Ironically, Daj Hammarskjold, too, was a casualty of the Congo crisis, killed in a crash of a UN Douglas DC-6 airliner in September 1961 over the Congo-Zambian border while en route to negotiate a cease fire between UN non-combatants and Katanga troops of Tshombe.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>*Hanger Digest*, Air Mobility Command Museum, Vol 3, No 2 (April 2003): 4-8

<sup>17</sup>Sibbald, 6.

<sup>18</sup>*New York Times*, December 8, 1961, page 1.

<sup>19</sup>The four engine, piston-powered DC-6 was built in the Douglas plant at Santa Monica. The Air Force version was named the C-118 *Liftmaster*. Goran Bjorkdahl insists that Hammarskjold's plane was downed by enemy fire with

Army general Mobutu Sese Seko who the United States backed as a capable politician, consolidated power and exercised it to create a dictatorship that lasted thirty-two years from 1965 until he was weakened by prostate cancer and deposed in 1997. In 1971, Mobutu, who channeled billions of dollars reaped from copper resources into his private Swiss bank accounts, renamed the country Zaire in what he termed the Africanization movement. To publicize that and his own world image, Mobutu promoted a spectacular heavyweight championship fight in 1974 between Muhammad Ali and George Foreman. An award-winning documentary entitled "When We Were Kings" revealed the political tensions of that bout and indeed the whole era. C-124s are not mentioned, though of course Ali and entourage and Foreman whose baggage included his very large pet German Shepherd arrived by airplane. Foreman may or may not have known that German Shepherds were used by Belgium Congo police and were the icon of colonial repression.

Isolation for people of central Africa continues into the twenty-first century and makes the Democratic Republic of the Congo – the name was changed back after Mobutu's fall – one of the more self-indulgent countries in the world. The experience did show that through uncertain surroundings and hardships in operating the Globemaster on its mission to the Congo, it was a reliable large scale airlifter. Remarkably, not a single C-124 was lost in fulfilling this UN mission. The C-124 showed that it could take a punch. Could it be that this record dispelled any doubt in the Pentagon of the capability and the reliability of the Globemaster in dispensing U. S. military power to the far corners? The Congo offered a proving ground for a vigilant, on-going, global U. S. presence to meet the exigencies of the Cold War and the 1607th crews and planes proved equal to the task. The U. S. would and could compete with the Kremlin in the emerging countries. The Globemaster would and could provide the airlift for global gamesmanship.

Not that the end results of the Congo game and U. S. and U. N. intervention was all that positive where making the world safe for

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intention. See newspaper articles such as Julian [Borger](#) "Dag Hammarskjöld: evidence suggests UN chief's plane was shot down," *The Guardian*, August 17, 2011.

democracy was concerned. Indeed, if analysts had been on their toes a message might have been received about what aftereffects of outside military assistance without much cultural awareness would have. The African airlift and American participation in it did not offer a promising model for continuing the U. S. export of its interests into places unable to change centuries of non-democratic rule. Capable though the Air Force and the airlift might be, the experience proved that favorable outcomes were difficult to achieve.

As the Congo crisis subsided, Dover C-124s continued flying missions in airlift support of Thule, to the NATO forces in Europe, to the Caribbean, and to the Far East. Even so, with the overwater duties, an obvious shift in mission readiness and aircraft and crew duties was occurring with a new game afoot. Joint service exercises began to dominate the scene. Proof by experiment was needed for rising limited war options. An extraordinary amount of time, energy, and resources were devoted in the early sixties to training operations dubbed Swift Strike, Desert Strike, and Gold Fire. Where was it leading to? Vietnam, of course, as the Kennedy administration sent the first helicopters there in 1961.

In two years of joint exercises, MATS proved again and again that it could respond to the Pentagon priorities during the era. The military planners sought to place in operation Commander-in-Chief John Kennedy's reasoning that counter-insurgency would be the more effective method of stymieing Communist advances in the Third World during this world wide Cold War period. On July 21, 1963, in the southeastern United States, seventy-five thousand men launched a one-month long inter-service war game termed Operation Swift Strike. It was the largest peacetime maneuver in U. S. history. This integrated Air Force-Army combat force, firing blanks but noisy enough to awaken imaginations of the American Civil War in this southern area, intended to demonstrate its readiness to "meet a military emergency anywhere in the world."<sup>20</sup> It succeeded in transporting 34,000 troops and 27,000 tons of material into an area while training for assault of the enemy troops and re-supply of forward positions. Operation Gold Fire followed the next year, moving the combat zone to the foothills of the

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<sup>20</sup>*The Gadsden Times*, September 17, 1963, 1.



Ozarks, perhaps better to simulate the terrain of the central highlands. C-124s, along with the sturdy C-130s hit the ground hard practicing short field landing techniques. These maneuvers claimed much of the time and budget resources of Dover and other MATS bases as crews practiced lifting and dropping troops into battle zones. Congo had demonstrated the long range and extended time capabilities. The stateside exercises would condition aircrews no less than the troops for even more direct involvement in distant crises. While the C-124 played a valuable role in the preparatory exercises and in the early years of combat in Vietnam, little recognition came to the Globemaster. An early example appears in an Air University Review article entitled, “USAF Airlift and the Airmobility Idea in Vietnam” where the author barely mentions the C-124, while concentrating on the contributions, laudable to be sure, of the C-123s and C-130s.<sup>21</sup>



*C-124 formation dropping troops from the 101st airborne over the Kentucky countryside*

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<sup>21</sup>Ray L. Bowers, “USAF Airlift and the Airmobility Idea in Vietnam.” *Air University Review*, November-December, 1974.

Not only training, but fighting equipment seemed to be designed especially for Southeast Asia and the new counter-insurgency strategies to be implemented there. The new M16, for example, appeared in 1963 and was thought by its designers to be as effective as the Soviet bloc AK-47 Kalashnikovs for jungle warfare. It replaced the wood stock M14 for U.S. Army troops in Vietnam. Bell developed an improved UH-1, the D model, which joined the US Army inventory in 1963 and could carry twelve soldiers with heavy armament on a 290 mile round trip.

In Asia, insurgencies with Marxist leanings in Malaya, Indonesia, and the Philippines worried American military and civilian administrators. But it was in Vietnam that the worries advanced into preventive military measures with the sending of U. S. Army advisors into the field to mentor South Vietnam soldiers. The Congo Airlift and the joint military-airlift exercises that followed it were, in retrospect, the natural forerunners to full U. S. commitment to contain Communism by force if necessary by battling insurgency on the ground halfway around the world. Korea had been a little different. Indeed, it was a far off war on the Asian land mass, a predicament that West Pointers from Douglas MacArthur on had sworn to avoid, but the Korean War had been forced on the United States because not only the government of South Korea was in danger of being extinguished but Japan, nearly defenseless, could be in peril especially if the U. S. folded in Korea.

Vietnam, however, presented more options, not a cut and dried fight there here situation. The domino theory certainly decried the fall of friendly Southeast Asian governments to Communist force, but even so, bad as that would be, it was not catastrophic to most Americans, not like losing China had been or Japan would have been.

At the same time, rapid increase in available aircraft technology meant that the C-124 was nearing the end of its prominence as a MATS airlifter. The C-130 Hercules could fly across oceans with cargo and troops and land in forward areas. Charleston AFB received its first C-130 in December 1964. Many more were in production. The Boeing 707 rolling off the lines in plants in Washington and Kansas would become as successful an airplane ever built, perhaps more so than the Douglas C-47 had been. It could carry some cargo and a lot of soldiers at much faster speeds. Both of these airlifters were available in 1965. In 1965, an article in the Airlifter reported the coming replacement of C-

124s by the brand new C-141 Starlifters, a jet transport developed by Lockheed and built at Marietta, Georgia, and at Oklahoma City's Tinker Field. In the statistics given by the author of this article, Airman Second Class (A2C) Walt Rykiel, the Globemasters of Dover had logged 870,000 hours in the air and covered some 174 million miles into most corners of the earth.<sup>22</sup> During its eleven years of duty with the 1607th, 32 crew members were lost in the five deadly crashes that occurred. Ironically, the 1607th's other heavy lifter, the turbo prop C-133 Cargomaster also built by Douglas had five crashes in the same period in which 33 crew members died, a total of 65 airmen lost by the 1607th ATW from 1957 to 1965.<sup>23</sup>

In 1965, however, the 285 Globemasters that remained in the MATS inventory, gave strategic military planners a huge resource in airlift and in planning. Enough perhaps to tip the balance toward favoring U. S. military deployment with active combat troops and equipment to Vietnam. In 1965, the stateside large scale maneuvers ended. The training was over and the real war about to begin. Globemaster navigators would be called on to use their skill to guide planes over the vast Pacific.

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<sup>22</sup>Walt Rykiel, *Airlifter*, 1965, page 1.

<sup>23</sup>Walt Rykiel, *Airlifter*, 1965, page 1.

