



The Airlifter

Newsletter of the Troop Carrier/Tactical Airlift Association

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Volume VII

Finances/Membership

As of May 31 we had \$6,446.60 in our bank account. A deposit of \$362.00 was made on July 10, bringing the total to \$6,806.60. A total of \$1,300 has been spent on the upcoming convention, primarily as a deposit with the hotel. D.K. Moody became our most recent member when he joined as a 5 year member as member number 097. That means we are only three members away from number 100.

San Antonio in November!

November is barely two months away, and time for Convention in San Antonio. Andy Vaquera and Hector Leyva have put in a lot of hard work bringing everything together. Cutoff for registration with the hotel is October 5, so if you've been thinking of coming but haven't made up your mind yet, there's still time to book a room and come on down and eat some Enchiladas and refried beans and drink a margarita or two if you are so inclined. Details are on the Association web site at www.troopcarrier.org/home.html. Check the web site to see who has registered.

Become a Sponsor

The Troop Carrier/Tactical Airlift Association is a registered not-for-profit organization chartered in the State of Texas and registered with the US Internal Revenue Service as a veterans organization under Article 501 C(19) of the US Code. Although membership dues and travel expenses for Association events such as our upcoming Convention are not deductible, because we are a "war veterans" organization in that at least 90% of our members have served in wartime, any contributions made to the Association are fully deductible. If you would like to make a tax-deductible contribution, send it to TCTAA treasurer Ralph Bemis, 527 Pickthorn Road, Cabot Arkansas, 72023.

Unit Changes

There are going to be some changes in the designation of present-day US Air Force combat airlift units that are sort of a chipping away at the troop carrier heritage. The 314th Airlift Wing, which is currently the host unit at Little Rock AFB, Arkansas, will be replaced by the 19th Airlift Wing, The 314th designation will go the unit responsible for C-130 training while the 463rd Airlift Wing will be inactivated. With this action, the only one of the World War II troop carrier designations still belonging to a modern

combat airlift organization will be the 317th Airlift Group at Dyess AFB, Texas and the 2005 BRAC recommended that it should be deactivated and its airplanes redistributed to other units. The 60th, 62nd, 436th, 437th and 438th designations were given to former MATS air transport units when Military Airlift Command activated in early 1966 and are still in existence, although not with the squadrons that were originally assigned to them. The 374th designation is now with an Air Mobility Command wing at Yokota AB, Japan while the 435th designation is at Ramstein AB, Germany.

DRAGON ROUGE/RED DRAGON, DRAGON NOIR/BLACK DRAGON

The deactivation of the 463rd Airlift Wing will send the unit's lineage and heraldry to join that of the historic 464th Troop Carrier Wing, the unit that flew what is perhaps the most historic peacetime troop carrier mission every flown, and which earned the wing the prestigious MacKay Trophy for the most meritorious flight of 1964 for a US Air Force aircraft. It all took place in November 1964 – exactly 44 years ago – within a year after the 464th TCW became operational as Tactical Air Command's fourth C-130 wing. The stage was set for a rescue mission in early August when fierce Simba tribesmen captured the town of Stanleyville in the former Belgian Congo and began rounding up all whites in the city and holding them hostage in the downtown Victoria Residence, an apartment complex in downtown Stanleyville. Other whites were rounded up and held hostage in Paulis, a town some 225 miles northeast of Stanleyville.



The Simba Rebellion, which broke out in early 1964 and gained in intensity in the summer, was the last of a series of events that took place in the Congo after Belgian granted its former colony independence. The Congolese government turned to the United States for assistance in subduing the rebels and received a US military mission provided by the US Strike Command, a joint service organization made up of elements of the US Army and the Air Forces Tactical Air Command, that included a detachment of

four C-130s from the 464th TCW as part of Project LEO. Also included in the mission were a number of CIA-provided Douglas A-26 Invaders and Grumman T-28 trainers that had been modified into attack aircraft. Many of the pilots were Cubans who had been recruited for operations against the Castro government in Cuba. The Congolese government also hired a mercenary army made up primarily of whites from South Africa and Rhodesia, and led by a legendary Irishman by the name of Mike Hoare who had fought in Burma in 1944 with the forces of British Brigadier Orde Wingate.

The Simbas held Stanleyville for 111 days, during which the world looked on in horror as they carried out a reign of terror that including ripping out the heart of the mayor of Stanleyville and eating it as the man lay dying. Scores of white and colored women were raped and thousands of Congolese were killed and often mutilated. Attempts to free the hostages through negotiation with the rebels met with no success because the negotiators couldn't find anyone with whom to negotiate!



Several military plans were developed to effect a rescue and some were quite elaborate. A Tactical Air Command plan allegedly would have involved large numbers of B-52s and a massive airborne operation using the entire 82nd Airborne Division. United States Air Forces, Europe, in whose area of responsibility the Congo lay, came up with a less ambitious plan worked out in

concert with the Belgian government. The USAFE plan called for the 322nd Air Division, which had only a few weeks before transferred from USAFE to MATS, to airlift a battalion of Belgian paracommandos from their base at Klinebrogel, Belgium to the Congo. While the 322nd has no airplanes of its own, it had operational control over two TAC TDY squadrons of C-130s at Evreux AB, France. One squadron was from the 317th Troop Carrier Wing, which had recently transferred from Evreux to Lockbourne AFB, Ohio which was equipped with C-130As. The other squadron was from the 464th TCW at Pope AFB, NC and flew brand-new C-130Es. Due to the long legs involved, the C-130Es were given the mission.

The Pope rote squadron at the time included crews from the 776th, 777th and 778th Troop Carrier Squadrons as the 777th had replaced the 776th and was in the processing of being replaced by the 778th. Since 322nd AD was the airlift unit for the region, Col. Burgess Gradwell, a former C-124 pilot who had recently joined the division staff when it transferred to MATS, was assigned as the mission commander. Lt. Col. Bob Lindsay, commander of the 777th, was the C-130 mission commander. The command arrangement became somewhat convoluted as a squadron of TAC airplanes on TDY assignment to MATS went on a mission where they transferred to US Strike Command control and were thus once again part of TAC. Captain Don Strobaugh of the 5th Aerial Port Squadron at Evreux was assigned to provide communications. He was accompanied by a radio repairman. Each crew was supplemented with a second loadmaster from 5th Aerial Port and the airplane's crew chief and his assistant accompanied their birds.

None of the men were told where they were going or what they were going to do when they took off from Evreux on November 16, 1964. Each navigator was given a sealed manila envelope with instructions not to open it until his airplane was off the ground



and mechanically sound. The envelope contained a flight plan to their first stop at Klinebrogel, Belgium. When they got to Klinebrogel the navigators received another envelope with similar instructions. They picked up members of the Belgian 1st Paracommando, commanded by Col. Charles Laurent. The next leg of their journey took the formation to Moron AB, a SAC base near the Spanish Rivera, where

the navigators were given a third manila envelope with a flight plan for Ascension Island, an island in the Atlantic off the coast of Africa. The first C-130 departed Evreux at 1700 on Monday, November 16 and arrived at Ascension at 1300 on Wednesday, November 18. When they reached Ascension, which was maintained by the UK, the American airmen and Belgian paratrooper rested and familiarized themselves with each other's procedures. For most of the Belgians, this was the first time they would be jumping from a C-130 and they practiced exiting from the jump doors. The thirteen C-130s from Evreux were joined at Ascension by a TAC "Talking Bird" airplane, a C-130E equipped with a special communications package in the cargo compartment manned by radio operators whose equipment maintained contact with US headquarters in the US and Europe all the way up to and including the White House. They were also joined by an Air Weather Service WC-130 and a MATS C-124 that had brought in a refueling truck. The force remained at Ascension until late Saturday afternoon when Col. Gradwell received a message that the formation was to proceed to Kamina, a "secret" airfield in the Southern Congo that had been built by the United States in the 1950s as a relief field for SAC bombers.



A base of operations was set up in a large hangar and the crews and paratroopers waited for the word to fly the mission.

The thirteen TAC C-130s from France were joined at Kamina by two Talking Bird airplanes, the one that had been with them at Ascension and another that was already in the Congo with the LEO force. Several MATS C-124s had brought in equipment

and supplies, including fuel trucks and rations. The men kept busy going over procedures, but were entertained by movies that were shown in the hangar.



While the rescue force waited, US and European diplomats attempted to arrange a meeting with rebel representatives. The meeting finally took place on Monday, but it got nowhere. When the rebel representative refused to agree to a US proposal to allow the Red Cross to fly the hostages to safety, the State Department sent word to US Ambassador to Kenya William Atwood to break off the talks.

While the negotiations were taking place and the rescue force waited, a force of mercenaries had started on the way to Stanleyville. Late on Monday evening, Colonel Gradwell and LEO force commander Colonel Clayton Issacson, who was now in command of the mission, received word to

launch the mission for a dawn attack on Tuesday morning. The crews and paratroopers were told to go to bed to get a few hours rest before the mission departed a few hours earlier.

The formation began taking off a few hours later, and headed north toward Stanleyville. Chalks One through Five were loaded with 320 paratroopers, who would jump into a strip of grass next to the runway at the Sabenas airport outside the city and secure the field so the other seven airplanes could land. Col. Gradwell was in Chalk One, which was flown by Captain "Huey" Long's Stan/Eval crew. Shortly after takeoff Captain Mack Secord's Chalk Six airplane lost a life raft, which came out of its compartment and wrapped itself around the vertical stabilizer. Secord and his crew turned and went back to Kamina and switched their load of classified cargo to the spare airplane and took off again. (John Coble, who was Huey Long's navigator, told me in a phone conversation several years ago that the cargo on Secord's airplane was made up of brooms that the paratroopers were to use to sweep the runway. Fortunately, they weren't needed.)

The airdrop formation arrived at Stanleyville just as the sun was breaking over the horizon. A flight of two A-26s made a strafing pass on the airport and the C-130s came in right behind them. Col. Laurent led his men out of the first airplane. The crews had been briefed that they would probably not encounter any ground fire, but .50-caliber bullets came up to meet each airplane in what was the baptism of fire for the Hercules. (Although 315th Air Division C-130s had started flying flare missions over Laos previously, none had taken any hits.) As soon as the troops were on the ground,

Col. Issacson made a low pass down the runway in the Talking Bird airplane which served as his command ship.



Within minutes and only light casualties, Col. Laurent reported that the airfield was secure and the C-130s could begin landing. Chalks Seven, Eight and Nine landed and discharged additional troops and cargo then took off again. Several hits were taken. Captain Jim Ostrem's airplane took a hit in a wing fuel tank and fuel came streaming out. The crew chief, Frank Schneider, whittled a plug out of the end of the broom

handle that was carried on all TAC C-130s and wrapped a rag around it, then stuck it in the hole. Frank, who would soon retrain as a C-130 flight mechanic (he died of Leukemia around 1970) thus originated what later came to be known as the "combat patch."

Mack Secord and his crew finally arrived as Chalk Six and were told to land and wait on the ground, along with Chalk Twelve, the hospital plane. By this time the Belgians had secured the airport and had made their way into town. Unfortunately, a slaughter began just as the first Belgians reached the hostages.



When the C-130s appeared over the airport, the Simba leaders decided to turn the hostages over to their rescuers. The rank and file, however, were not so inclined. They had spent the night before getting high on pot and a local homebrew. At first they went along and marched the hostages toward the airport, but dissent spread through their

ranks and suddenly they started shooting down their own officers, then turned their guns on the hostages, picking women and children as their targets. Men threw their bodies on top of their families to protect them. They would undoubtedly have massacred the entire lot had the first Belgian troopers not suddenly rounded a corner. When they saw the Belgians, the Simbas lost their courage and fled. Twenty-two bodies lay in the street. Among them was American medical missionary Dr. Paul Carlson, whose name had been in the news frequently as the Simbas claimed he was a US Army major and a CIA agent. (Carlson had actually served in the Navy – he may very well have had a CIA connection as many missionaries did.) Another missionary, Phyllis Rine, was also among the slain. Scores had been wounded.



At 1030 the Congolese and mercenaries arrived in Stanleyville. While the Belgian paratroopers were restrained in their reaction to the slaughter, the mercenaries were not under strict military discipline and the Simbas were hunted down and usually shot where they were found.

After the rescue, whites who had fled into the surrounding neighborhood came back and the hostages began moving toward the

airport. When they reached it, they saw Mack Secord's airplane sitting with the engines running and rushed aboard it. Many of the people were badly wounded and in need of medical treatment but the crew had a hard time convincing them they needed to get on the hospital plane which was parked nearby. Finally they got the worst cases onto the other airplane and then they loaded up as many as they could carry and started taxiing to the runway to takeoff. As they taxied past a tall clump of elephant grass, a Simba who had not been found by the Belgians ran out with a submachine gun and fired a burst right up into the wing, then tried to get into a paratroop door. Secord and his crew were completely unaware of what had happened, but the scene was witnessed by Captain B.J. Nunnally and his crew in the hospital plane. They tried to tell Secord what had happened but he either didn't hear – or as he told me, didn't want to hear – what they were saying. It wasn't until they were off the ground that the crew finally realized that their airplane had been damaged. The crew discussed their situation and the engineer, Crawford Ingraham, recommended that they refrain from using reverse when they landed on the long runway at Kamina.

As it turned out, Secord flew the mission with a brain concussion. The night before the mission the men had been treated to a "really bad movie" in the hangar and Secord had left early to go to the airplane to try to get some sleep. It was dark, black, African dark, and when he got to the airplane he couldn't see a thing. As he was climbing into the crew entrance door he bumped his head with such force that it caused a concussion. He was suffering from a "terrible headache" the entire time he was on the flight.

Captain Huey Long's airplane also suffered battle damage. After dropping Col. Laurent and the first load of paratroopers, they remained over the airport as a command ship, giving directions to the other airplanes. Even though they were orbiting at 2,000 feet, 50-caliber fire reached the airplane and damaged the hydraulics system. Col. Gradwell told Huey it was time for them to head for Stanleyville.

Captain Don Strobaugh and his radio repairman were on one of the first airplanes to land. A veteran combat controller whose airborne career dated back to the 1940s, Don had wanted to jump in with the Belgians but he was given explicit orders that no Americans were to be part of the airborne operation in order to avoid the appearance

that US paratroopers were involved. He remained on the ground at Stanleyville with the Belgians until the withdrawal.



The Stanleyville mission – DRAGON ROUGE – was flown on Tuesday before Thanksgiving. On Thanksgiving Day a second mission – DRAGON NOIR – was flown into Paulis. The Paulis operation was similar to the one two days before. The drop formation arrived to find the field obscured in a thick, red fog and the troops couldn't even see the ground until just before their feet touched. The landing airplanes also had a hard time seeing the ground.



The carnage of Stanleyville wasn't repeated at Paulis, but the 355 hostages who were rescued were in bad shape. One woman's husband, an American missionary from Arkansas, had been beaten to death two days previously.

After shuttling whites and colored people out of Stanleyville and Paulis, the rescue

force returned to Kamina. The day after the Paulis mission a tropical thunderstorm developed over the airport at Kamina and the C-130 crews, who hadn't had the luxury of a bath since they left France, stripped off their grimy flight suits and grabbed soap, then ran out into the rain for an impromptu shower. There were still many whites in Simba hands but the court of world opinion was beginning to turn against the US and Belgium. No more rescue operations were conducted with the Belgians and the rape and torture continued in Simba-held territory for several months, until the rebellion was finally put down the following summer.

The C-130 crews and the Belgians returned to hero's welcomes when they returned home. The 464th Troop Carrier Wing was awarded the MacKay Trophy. All of the crewmembers on the mission were awarded the Air Medal.

There is a foot note to this story. When word of the rescue reached MATS headquarters, the MATS PIO sent out a press release taking credit for the mission. Headlines after the mission read MATS RESCUES HOSTAGES!!! Needless to say, this caused no small degree of outrage at Pope, where the troops who had remained behind knew that it was "our guys" who had pulled this one off. One engineer, Charlie Watkins, a former paratrooper who had fought in Korea with the 187th Regimental Combat Team and whose favorite pastime was bending his elbow at the NCO Club bar,

was so incensed that he called up a general at the Pentagon and chewed him out over the telephone.

Some personal notes – The Dragon Rouge/Dragon Noir rescue force is well-represented within the TCTAA. Jim Ostrem is one of our board members. Don Strobaugh is a member, as is Tom Wark, who was a (very) young loadmaster in the 778th. There may be others as we have several Pope veterans from that time in our membership. Although I was in the 779th, I lived in a 778th room in the barracks and both of my roommates, Carl Eidson and Charles Zelinski, were on the mission.

There is one thing for certain – Dragon Rouge/Dragon Noir is a hard act to follow. So far, nothing has equaled it, not even the famous Israeli rescue mission to Entebbe. Hopefully, there will never be a need for such a mission in the future.