

By John T. Correll, Editor in Chief

Anything, Anywhere, Anytime

LT. GEN. William H. Tunner, who commanded the airlift over the Himalayan Hump in World War II and the Berlin Airlift after the war, said in his memoirs that "I have been convinced that we can carry anything, anywhere, anytime." The force has borne out General Tunner's expectation for more than fifty years through an organizational evolution from Air Transport Command to Military Air Transport Service to Military Airlift Command to Air Mobility Command.

Indeed, so reliant have the armed forces become on Air Force transport of troops and cargo that it is the airlifters, not the shooters, that are the limiting factor in national military strategy. The demand for airlift never stops. In a typical peacetime week, Air Mobility Command operates 1,000 missions and more than 3,000 sorties into forty countries.

Airlift is not the only way to move troops and cargo, but it has certain advantages. Military Airlift Command flew more than 500 sorties to resupply Israel during the Yom Kippur War of 1973. The first flights landed within forty-eight hours of the US decision to act. The first sealift vessel to reach Israel carried more tonnage than all the airlift missions put together—but that ship did not arrive until twenty days after hostilities had begun and twelve days after the cease-fire.

Airlift is a primary element in the Air Force's operational concept of "Global Reach, Global Power." Airlift is more than support for other forces. It is an instrument of national power in its own right, providing aid, presence, and strength at pivotal moments in distant locations. The big airlifters with the Stars and Stripes on the tail deliver the clear message that the United States is there.

Two years ago, the outlook for airlift was grim. The core airlifter, the C-141 Starlifter, was in deep trouble, having been flown hard and held in service far beyond its intended retirement date. At one juncture, seventy percent of the C-141s

were either grounded or restricted. The proposed replacement, the C-17, was in danger of cancellation. In a dramatic statement to Congress in 1994, Gen. Joseph Hoar of US Central Command said that "airlift in this country is broken right now. I'm not sure it's workable for even one major regional contingency." Air Mobility Command said it could pro-

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vide the lift for one contingency—but not for the two prescribed by national defense strategy.

In an amazing reversal of fortunes, the C-17 overcame its performance, production, and cost problems. The program is splendidly back on track. In November, the Defense Department authorized the Air Force to proceed with a procurement that will eventually reach 120 aircraft. The decision on whether to also buy modified "nondevelopmental" commercial aircraft has been deferred until next summer. An "aggressively managed" modernization effort will keep the C-141 operating until it is phased out in 2006.

Estimating the airlift requirement is a controversial business. In an *Airpower Journal* article last year, Lt. Col. Robert C. Owen, former chief of the Joint Doctrine Branch at Hq. USAF, argued that the demand for airlift always has (and probably always will) exceed the supply and that "effective airlift policymaking involves asking for what one can get instead of what one actually needs."

In 1981, the Congressionally mandated Mobility Study set the official requirement for airlift at sixty-six mil-

lion ton-miles per day. The computed requirement was understood to be higher, but that was essentially academic since the capability peaked below fifty million ton-miles per day. After the Cold War ended, a 1992 Mobility Requirements Study adjusted the goal downward to fifty-seven mtm/d. The current goal, set in 1995, is stated as a range: forty-nine to fifty-two mtm/d, depending on the stock of equipment and supplies prepositioned abroad. Present war-time airlift capability, counting activation of the Guard and Reserve and mobilization of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet, is approximately forty-nine mtm/d.

The Air Force will assign as much as it can of the routine airlift—especially bulk cargo that can be loaded onto standard freight pallets—to commercial carriers. Other parts of the mission, however, cannot be farmed out. Only the largest military airlifters carry outsize cargo, such as main battle tanks, armored fighting vehicles, and artillery. The Air Force would also use its own aircraft, probably the C-17s, for airdrop and forced entry operations. Civilian airliners would not normally be asked to fly into areas where there is appreciable risk of hostile fire. Power projection and crisis response are roles best suited to military airlifters.

No one seriously believes that an airlift capability of fifty million ton-miles per day is lavish. Nevertheless, airlift does not stir the passions and has traditionally had trouble holding its funding priority. There are already signs from some corners of the Pentagon of wobbling on the commitment to airlift modernization. The problem is financial competition with other programs.

This would be the wrong place to fall short for a nation with global interests and strategies and whose armed forces are largely based at home. Whatever lies ahead, airlift will be a first order requirement. This time, the priority should hold. The case for airlift is considerably more compelling than the requirement (for example) for more submarines. ■