

A/T/Q

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ON THE COVER: An American Bald Eagle flies into the names of many recent AMC operations, illustrating the theme for the 1999 A/TA Convention & Symposium, "Air Mobility: Always Engaged." By Collin R. Bakse, Editor and Art Director, A/TQ.

“1990-1999: A Decade of Turbulence and Change”

Lieutenant Colonel Greg Cook, USAF

For the men and women of Air Mobility Command, the 1990s will be remembered as a decade of extraordinary turbulence and change. From organizational and structural transformation on a monumental scale to extensive manning cuts and force realignments amid an unending series of wars, contingencies, and crises, these years left an indelible mark on the command. Through it all, mobility forces have shined, rising to the task again and again to guarantee the success of U.S. military and humanitarian operations spanning the globe. Yet the toll has been exacting, and we stand now on the edge of the millennium with a force that is tired and stretched nearly to its limits. As we enter the 21st Century, our central challenge will be to build on the noble traditions and successes of air mobility even as we rejuvenate our forces and prepare for the operations of the new epoch. It will not be an easy task.

The Operations Tempo Increases

This was the decade that began with the end of the Cold War. After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the Soviet Union disintegrated and our nuclear forces came off alert for the first time in over 40 years. The prelude, execution, and aftermath of the Gulf War in 1990-91 also marked a watershed event for air mobility forces. The massive buildup in the fall of 1991 during Operation DESERT SHIELD, and the combat successes of Operation DESERT STORM validated our operational principles and demonstrated to the world the incredible capabilities of U.S. air mobility forces. Strategic

airlift forces moved immense amounts of material and people, air refueling enabled both the rapid deployment of combat aircraft and the air campaign over Iraq, and tactical airlift operations proved pivotal to the ground war.

Since that time, operations in the Middle East have continued unabated under Operations SOUTHERN and NORTHERN WATCH, alongside other contingency and combat operations to contain Iraq.

The decade was also notable for a precipitous rise in peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, ranging from Kurdish refugee relief in Turkey, to famine and peacekeeping efforts in Somalia, and air mobility forces' rapid response to natural disasters worldwide. Time and time again, air mobility answered the call to deliver anytime, anywhere. They also responded twice to ethnic strife, repression, and conflict in the Balkans, supporting the full spectrum of contingency, combat, and humanitarian operations in both Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Kosovo region.

Air Mobility Forces in 1990

Air mobility forces at the beginning of the decade were organized, structured and manned far differently than today. The tanker force belonged primarily to Strategic Air Command (SAC), with most of the large KC-135 force standing on alert to support SAC bombers in the event of nuclear war. A few overseas squadrons supported European and Asian military operations, and somewhat predictable rotations and deployments in support of exercises and

operations were the norm for the continental U.S. (CONUS)-based forces. The KC-135R model modification program was in full swing, and provided huge increases in aircraft performance and reliability. The KC-10 fleet, having been procured in the 1980s, was relatively new and proving its tremendous capability as a swing role, air refuelable, airlifter and tanker.

The airlift force belonged primarily to Military Airlift Command (MAC), with several squadrons of tactical and operational support aircraft also assigned to theater commands to satisfy regional needs. The C-5 fleet was relatively healthy, after a significant effort in the mid-1980s to replace the center wing box in the A-model inventory of 78 aircraft. Fifty brand-new C-5Bs had been placed into service from 1986-89. The primary strategic airlift platform remained the C-141B, which continued to carry the bulk of airlift requirements even as plans for its replacement were taking shape. The C-130 force was very large, with a wide variety of special mission-equipped aircraft in addition to those assigned to its primary mission of tactical airlift. CONUS-based Operational Support Airlift and Aeromedical Evacuation aircraft were also assigned to MAC.

Force Structure and Organizational Change

Following the Gulf War, the U.S. military underwent dramatic force structure adjustments even as the overall operations tempo continued to increase. With a firm sense of direction given impending budget and personnel reductions, the Air Force implemented wide-ranging organizational restructuring. In 1992, strategic airlift and air refueling forces came together to forge Air Mobility Command, while CONUS-based C-130s were realigned into the new Air Combat Command. Drastic personnel cuts occurred as the Air Force drew down by one third, accompanied by multiple base closings resulting from Base Realignment and Closing (BRAC) actions. In the process, entire wings and squadrons of aircraft and personnel shifted to the bases remaining, causing tremendous readjustment and turmoil in the force. The rapid drawdown of combat forces also contributed to a temporary Air Force-wide surplus of pilots, many of whom were subsequently absorbed by air mobility squadrons. Up to 200% manned in some cases, mobility units enjoyed unusually high numbers of personnel. Although competing for limited training resources, the extra manning contributed to better management of squadron operations and administrative staff functions, and helped to offset the impact of an increasingly higher operations tempo. Given a relatively large number of aircrew members, the main limiting factor impacting air mobility operations inevitably became the number of aircraft available.

Strategic Airlift Fleet Challenges

The strategic airlift fleet was particularly stressed during the last ten years. The C-141 fleet began to experience wing structural problems after the Gulf War, which precipitated severe restrictions on its operational use and a rapid, massive retrofit program to repair the fleet. Acquisition of the C-17 gained speed as the realization grew that the C-141 was nearing the end of its structural and economic service life. In the meantime, the C-5 fleet supported a much greater percentage of strategic airlift needs, delivering to places it had never been before. Once C-17 deliveries began, the pace of C-141 retire-

ments brought on another dilemma. For every C-17 that came on board, approximately two C-141s left the inventory. While this created only a slight dip in overall fleet capacity, the number of aircraft, "the tails," began to shrink. Ironically, the most efficient strategic airlift force structure to support a "two nearly simultaneous major regional conflict" scenario, where the traffic flow concentrates into a few major ports and en route stops, is at odds with the day-to-day dispersed operations of the fleet. In other words, we can effectively mass our resources during war to support very challenging lift requirements, but are spread too thin in peacetime to meet the full range of global airlift needs.

LIEUTENANT COLONEL GREG COOK



Lieutenant Colonel Greg Cook is a senior pilot with over 3600 hours in the C-21, C-5, KC-135 and trainer aircraft. A veteran of Operation JUST CAUSE in Panama, Operations DESERT SHIELD and STORM in the Middle East, and Operation NORTHERN WATCH in Turkey, he has also served as a mobility force strategic planner at both Air Mobility Command and USAF Headquarters.

Currently the commander of the 436th Operations Support Squadron at Dover Air Force Base, Delaware, LTC Cook is a Life member of the Airlift/Tanker Association and acts as its Public Affairs Coordinator.

State of the Force 1999

The late 1990s brought many issues full circle. The CONUS-based C-130 fleet was reassigned to Air Mobility Command, finally consolidating most state-side airlift units under AMC. Modernization of the C-130 fleet has begun, with an eye towards standardizing the configuration of this diverse fleet. The C-17 passed significant acquisition and operational milestones, and is a star performer in the Air Mobility team. The C-141 continues to operate well even as it is retired. The high pace of operations has effectively reduced the operational

capability of the C-5 fleet, but realization of its high value has spawned a number of acquisition efforts to modernize it through new engines, avionics, and other improvements. The KC-135 fleet has begun a full-scale avionics modernization program, and the entire AMC fleet is being modified to meet new international communication, navigation, and operational requirements. The result is a force in transition, stressed not only by a high operations tempo, but also dealing with a large number of simultaneous modernization and acquisition efforts.

Our people are stressed too. The training impact to remain on top of ever-changing aircraft configurations is immense, and the incessant ebb and flow of contingencies and crises inevitably takes operational priority over routine training, if only for short duration. Squadron manning is back to normal authorization levels, so extra personnel are no longer a luxury. Retaining experienced personnel is a significant challenge. The cumulative impact of these issues is a crew force that is less experienced, that spends more time away from home, and fulfills training requirements as best they can. The sense on the line is many times one of "barely hanging on." Are aircrews members still capable and qualified? Absolutely, and when the nation calls, they continue to respond as always with exceptional professionalism and skill. Yet challenges remain.

Preparing for the Future

AMC is meeting these concerns head on. One of the most promising initiatives is a new Aircrew/Aircraft Tasking System currently under analysis. The purpose of this system is for wings to identify their long-term training needs and operational capabilities, then balance them and work with the Tanker Airlift Control Center to create a stabilized, flexible aircrew and aircraft tasking system. If successful, it should maximize available aircraft and aircrew resources to support daily worldwide airlift and air refueling requirements without sacrificing required aircrew training and long-term readiness. Under normal

peacetime operations, it would also provide units with the ability to more effectively manage their squadron operations support and administrative tasks. During war and contingency operations, it allows for surge and reconstitution stages to occur, with various options for increasing and decreasing the overall tasking levels.

A review of training requirements is also under way, with an effort to reduce the number of aircrew currency events required. As simulator visual presentations improve, more training events are being accomplished in the simulation arena.

The new Air Expeditionary Force (AEF) concept being implemented Air Force-wide will play heavily into the air mobility operations tempo in the coming years. Many wonder whether AEF will exacerbate the issues facing our forces or inject a greater measure of predictability.

Conclusion

The decade of change is behind us, although the turbulence remains. No longer do we face reorganization and structural transformation on a massive scale, and we are beginning to realize the benefits of our modernization efforts. We recognize that air mobility forces will always be engaged, as the demand for their capabilities will always exceed the supply available. These facts of life are universally accepted. Managing the tasking of air mobility resources as we continue to train our personnel and modernize our fleets is a difficult and challenging endeavor, and an issue the command addresses every day. To successfully meet that challenge, however, will ensure the viability and capability of our forces well into the next millennium.