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A series of 1960 congressional hearings were a turning point in Air Force airlift.

The Hearings That Revolutionized Airlift

By Robert C. Owen

Military airlift strategy—never the stuff to fire up the American imagination—has made the evening news only once. In the spring of 1960, generals, congressmen, and captains of industry gathered on Capitol Hill to settle the details of a new model of airlift organization and strategy. Before them was the choice of sticking with Military Air Transport Service as a modestly equipped organization focused on supporting strategic bomber deployments or expanding it profoundly to enable worldwide air deployments of air and ground combat forces in all kinds of wars.

The Army, endorsing a new strategy called Flexible Response, wanted the nation to develop military forces to fight all types of wars. Most senior Air Force officers preferred to stick with the Eisenhower Administration's New Look strategy: relying on allies to fight their own wars while the US military focused on preparing for a general nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Airlift was a critical sidebar to this broader debate, since the Army would need a lot of it to get to future wars in a timely manner. Thus, a commitment to expand the airlift force would mean explicit national endorsement of Flexible Response and a large, costly shift in military force structure and a change in the bureaucratic power of each service. From March to April of that year, major magazines and even prime-time TV carried accounts of the hearings. They comprised a turning point in American national defense.

THE ARMY NEEDS A RIDE

MATS held the spotlight because it was the nation's sole long-range military airlift arm and there was dispute over how it should be organized and equipped. Its charter documents established the command as a common-user organization available to all the services. But in keeping with DOD's nuclear war focus and the budgetary conservatism of New Look, the Air Force had tailored MATS to serve the transportation needs of Strategic Air Command in the early days of a nuclear conflict.

This left the Army without a ride to the fight, since SAC's need to move personnel, light vehicles, aircraft support equipment, and nuclear weapons was tiny in relation to the challenge of moving whole divisions of personnel, tanks, artillery, engineering equipment, and other heavy gear. To move those, the Army needed a MATS equipped with more, larger, and faster aircraft than required by SAC.

Despite the growing debate around it, MATS itself was in good shape. Under the leadership of Lt. Gen. Joseph Smith since 1951, the command had grown into the largest military air transport arm in the world. It had a global network of bases and routes and codified standards of reliability, safety, and even peacetime passenger service rivaling those of contemporary airlines.

The core of the fleet consisted of two Douglas aircraft derived from airliner designs: about 280 C-124 Globemaster IIs and just over 100 C-118 Liftmasters. They

Small fleets of C-121 Super Constellations (such as this one), C-97s, and C-133s augmented the MATS core fleet of C-124s and C-118s.

were the "Mutt and Jeff" of airlift. The big, slab-sided Globemaster (nicknamed "Old Shaky") was a substantially modified derivative of a World War II unpressurized airliner. It cruised at a ponderous 200 mph, had an alarming way of shuddering and groaning in flight, but could carry a maximum of 35 tons of cargo. It also could move about 20 tons over the California-Hawaii route, the longest overwater leg in the MATS system without intermediate stopping points.

The C-118 was a virtually unmodified version of the commercial DC-6A. It cruised at about 307 mph while carrying around 75 passengers—or 13 tons—between California and Hawaii.

Augmenting these aircraft were small fleets—some derived from other commercial designs: Boeing C-97s, Lockheed C-121s, and Douglas C-133s to cover VIP and other specialized missions. Finally, in an emergency, MATS could call on a host of nonscheduled cargo carriers and scheduled passenger airlines for augmentation.

In its fleet and operations, MATS gave the Pentagon and USAF reason to be satisfied—it could do its job at minimal expense.

In the early days of nuclear conflict, doing its job meant supporting the SAC "reconstitution" missions. In peacetime and under warnings of potential conflicts, that meant supporting the deployment of SAC units to forward air bases. Moving the forward echelons of a wing of 45 B-47s, for example, involved the transportation of some 1,756 personnel and at least 253 tons of cargo. In the event of a surprise attack, even as bombers might be en route to their initial targets, SAC support personnel would load up on arriving MATS transports as fast as they came in and then depart for forward bases where the bombers would recover. There, they would meet whatever bombers limped in from their first strikes and reconstitute them for subsequent missions.

Far left: An airman marshals a C-124 from the 50th Military Airlift Squadron after a long over-ocean flight. Center: Pictured are Rep. L. Mendel Rivers (l), Lt. Gen. William Tunner (c), and Gen. Thomas White. The dignitaries had gathered at Scott AFB, Ill., for the presentation of the Distinguished Service Medal to Tunner. Left: Lt. Gen. Joseph Smith, commander of MATS, in 1954. Smith felt that the primary function and responsibility of MATS was supporting SAC, not carrying soldiers.

The C-124/C-118 team was well-designed for that task, with vehicles, equipment, and bombs going on the slower aircraft, while personnel, baggage, and toolboxes sped ahead in C-118s to get to the recovery bases as quickly as possible. Indeed, in 1956 testimony, Smith revealed that his fleet was sized almost exactly to make the reconstitution move in a single sortie by each aircraft in MATS. Moreover, based as it was on older airliner designs, the MATS fleet also was about as cheap to acquire and operate as was possible.

The Army was less impressed by MATS. C-118s, -124s, and the other transports in the MATS fleet might have been cost-effective mobility platforms for SAC, but they offered little to ground commanders. None of them could carry heavy equipment, such as tanks and mechanized artillery. In theory, the C-124 could carry something like the 24-ton M41 light tank and towed artillery. But the Army really didn't know that, since MATS exercised only with SAC. In any case, even over the relatively narrow Atlantic, the entire fleet of lumbering C-124s would take weeks to generate the thousands of missions needed to move a single infantry division.

Such a move over the Pacific would have been preposterous. This was a huge concern for the Army, since its studies revealed that airlift support would be vital to its ability to fight under the threat or reality of nuclear combat.

Contemplating the obvious needs to get to future battlefields and then move quickly on them, Army and Air Force leaders since World War II had recommended keeping enough air transports on hand to move an entire corps anywhere on Earth in a matter of days or weeks. Addressing the battlefield mobility issue, the Army's Project Vista study estimated in 1954 that a single corps maneuvering on a nuclear battlefield would require the support of 1,200 Air Force transports.

Several years later Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, who had resigned as Army Chief of Staff over the refusal of the Defense

Department to endorse a strategy more flexible than New Look, wrote, "Our [defense] program must provide for mobile, ready forces prepared for rapid movement to areas of strategic importance overseas."

Future Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger wrote, "The tactics for limited nuclear war should be based on small, highly mobile, self-contained units, relying on air transport, even within the combat zone." Undoubtedly, by the late 1950s, influential people throughout government, the military, and academia got the message: Army effectiveness in future conflicts would depend on the availability of a continuum of airlift support, from the homeland to its most forward positions.

The Air Force seemed intent on increasing the Army's anxiety. USAF leaders never missed an opportunity to reiterate that they would accept no dilution of SAC's pre-eminent claim on MATS support. "The MATS charter," reported Smith not long after taking over the command—and quoting the 1948 document—"excludes … the responsibility for the tactical air transportation of airborne troops … [or] the initial supply … of units in forward combat areas."

As late as 1958, the Air Force vice chief of staff and immediate past commander of SAC, Gen. Curtis E. LeMay, told Congress that any money appropriated for new jet transports would be spent on tankers for SAC instead. This statement must have galled Army generals, since fast, high-capacity jet transports were just what they needed to plan large unit moves involving heavy equipment and hundreds of sorties.

Driving more nails into the coffin of Army mobility aspirations, the Air Force kept the MATS fleet focused on airliner designs. In 1954 it sparked furious protests by Army supporters with an announcement that it was transferring funds allocated for C-124s, which had some utility to the Army, to purchase more C-118s, which didn't.

A few years later the Air Force canceled the C-132 project that could have produced an aircraft capable of carrying a tank. The air service also reduced the number of C-133s procured and slow-rolled proposals to build a new jet transport. In any case, the jet aircraft proposed by Smith would have been too small for Army use. By 1959, then, there could be little doubt that the Air Force was not eager to provide airlift for the Army unless someone forced it to.

Congressional efforts to coax the Air Force into changing its stance on airlift began in 1956, triggered by the Air Force's proposal to buy more C-118s instead of C-124s. Prior to that year, the Army and its various supporters were content to write reports and articles to make the case for additional airlift. Thereafter, several senior Army commanders made their concerns public, while a series of congressional hearings that year and in 1958 and 1959 explored the details of the issues involved.

The hearings had mixed results. Overall, they had only an indirect impact on national strategy, given the Administration's resistance to costly force structure investments that implied endorsement of Flexible Response. The hearings did, however, illuminate—and then sideline—several secondary issues. These included proposals by the major airlines and their congressional supporters to disband MATS and perform its missions by commercial contract. There also were discussions about assigning the transoceanic airlift mission to the troop carrier forces assigned to Tactical Air Command and overseas commands and providing short-range theater airlift.

RETURN OF "MR. AIRLIFT"

In the first case, most involved, except the airlines themselves, soon recognized that commercial carriers could not do hard-core military missions—those requiring instant readiness, aircraft specialized for military cargo, and flying into a combat zone.

In the second case, organizing and equipping troop carriers to do the transoceanic mission would simply have replicated MATS under a different name.

By settling these issues, the 1958-59 airlift hearings cleared the question of whether MATS should be strengthened to provide mobility for the Army.

By 1959, bureaucratic and political power had shifted in favor of expanding MATS' mission. Most importantly, airlift had captured the attention of a group of Democratic congressmen interested in moving the country toward Flexible Response. This so-called Congressional Reform Movement included the enormously powerful Rep. Carl Vinson (D-Ga.), chair of the House Armed Services Committee, and his point man on airlift issues, Rep. L. Mendel Rivers (D-S.C.). Among supporters were Sen. Dennis Chavez (D-N.M.), Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.), Sen. Lyndon B. Johnson (D-Texas), and Sen. John F. Kennedy (D-Mass.). All wanted more non-nuclear force funding to give the United States more diplomatic and military flexibility and credibility.

Pressured by this group and fully aware of the implications of growing Soviet nuclear capabilities, the Eisenhower Administration had begun to explore ways to gain greater military flexibility. Eisenhower chartered a major study of military airlift for release in early 1960.

In July 1958, as the airlift debate heated up, USAF inserted a change agent into the process. It plunked Lt. Gen. William H. Tunner into the melee, as the new commander of MATS. Tunner had been away from airlift for seven years, after seeing Smith selected to run MATS instead of him. He was so incensed by that event he did not even mention it in his memoirs. His main biographer, Robert A. Slayton, later surmised that Tunner had been sent into exile by Air Force enemies fed up with his constant calls for the modernization and expansion of all airlift forces under a single command. But in reality, the jobs Tunner got during his "exile" were career builders—deputy commander of Air Materiel Command, commander of US Air Forces in Europe, and then Air Force deputy chief of staff for operations.

When "Mr. Airlift" returned to MATS, he had broad credibility and the Air Force Chief of Staff, Gen. Thomas D. White, gave him a free hand to work with Congress to conduct decisive hearings on the future of MATS.

Tunner wasted no time. In November 1958 he successfully lobbied the Army for a commitment of 18,500 troops to participate in a major airlift test from the US mainland to Puerto Rico. Tunner got the Air Force to pony up $10.5 million to pay for it. Meanwhile, he and Rivers began planning for major hearings on airlift in early 1960. Then, when Eisenhower chartered his airlift study, Tunner and Rivers made sure a MATS civil servant, John F. Shea, was on the team.

Shea had been in airlift since 1943, and Tunner trusted him to express doctrines and strategic concepts of what he sometimes called "Big Airlift." Shea shaped the President's and other DOD studies on the issue and worked with Rivers' general counsel, Robert Smart, to set the agenda and prepare evidence and testimony at the forthcoming hearings.

Rivers opened the national airlift hearings on March 8, 1960, with some warnings. Speaking mainly to representatives of the commercial carriers, he announced that the purpose of the hearings would be "to give the military the best thing they can get." He went on to say he was willing to usurp the prerogatives of the Executive Branch, if necessary, by requesting funding for specific military aircraft for delivery at specific times.

In other words, if the Air Force balked again at developing or buying modern

transports, he would jam airlift modernization down its throat.

Rivers' confidence reflected his sense that the policy deck was now stacked in his favor. Most importantly, the Pentagon had just released a report, "The Role of Military Air Transport Service in Peace and War," encapsulating the outcome of Eisenhower's airlift study, in the form of "Nine Presidentially Approved Courses of Action." These actions included military and civil reserve airlift modernization and increased emphasis on civil contract carriers in peacetime. They also protected MATS and military reserve airlift component readiness, to perform hardcore missions.

Shea and Smart had set a hearing agenda and witness list guaranteed to present airlift expansion in its best light, with little opportunity for naysayers to make their cases.

Consequently, Phase 1 of the hearings was something of a love fest for airlift reformers. Tunner and the Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Lyman L. Lemnitzer, were the senior military witnesses until the last hearing day, when Air Force Chief of Staff White appeared to endorse the President's courses of action. Things started well for the reformers when the new deputy secretary of defense and one-time deputy chief of staff for the World War II Air Transport Command, James H. Douglas, revealed that, henceforth, limited war would receive coequal consideration with general war in airlift planning.

Following this lead, Lemnitzer reaffirmed a long-standing Army requirement to move two infantry divisions by air to any point on the planet in four weeks—a move involving something like 25,000 troops and 40,000 tons of cargo. Facing the obvious, the Air Force plans director, Maj. Gen. Hewitt T. Wheless, flatly stated USAF could not make such a move to Korea.

Thus, as never before in an unclassified forum, the inadequacies of the national airlift program were on display.

Between the first and second phases of the hearings, the airlift exercise to Puerto Rico drove home the point that airlift forces were inadequate to needs.

Beginning on March 14, a hodgepodge fleet of MATS transports rumbled into the air from 14 bases and turned toward Puerto Rico. Creaking C-124s, sleeker C-118s, humpbacked C-121s, and a handful of C-133s—477 aircraft in all—pushed east in the kind of rhythmic stream that Tunner had refined to an art over the India-China Hump in World War II and during the Berlin Airlift. Mechanics, cargo handlers, security policemen, and drivers—the whole airlift system—shifted to 84-hour work weeks to keep that stream flowing. Aircrew worked duty periods as long as 35 hours to fly units from all over the US. When the weather didn't cooperate, they pressed on through squall lines and heavy turbulence with cargo straining against straps and soldiers clinging to their seats and filling their airsickness bags.

Finally, after two weeks, the exercise ended with MATS personnel and the aircraft fleet on the verge of breakdown. Their unsustainable level of effort, however, had produced 50,496 hours, 1,263 individual missions, and lifted more than 29,000 troops and nearly 11,000 tons of materiel into and out of Puerto Rico.

Tunner made sure that all of these shortfalls and work-arounds entered the airlift debate. Military leaders by the dozen, planeloads of congressmen and senators, and 352 reporters—Tunner invited anyone he thought might influence the course of airlift events or public opinion. The event generated more than 33,000 column inches of newspaper coverage, and virtually all articles and reports written on the exercise came to the conclusion that MATS was woefully inadequate and needed immediate modernization. In the view of Tunner's publicity officer, this event was "the most spectacularly successful failure in the history of military training."

BRINGING UP PUERTO RICO

In the final phase of the hearings, MATS and the Army came in to brief the results and implications of the Puerto Rico exercise. Emphasizing the unavoidable artificialities of the exercise, given the limited capabilities of MATS aircraft, Maj. Gen. Ben Harrell, Continental Army Command's (CONARC) deputy chief of staff for operations, pointed out that troops and cargo had not even been delivered to secure bases and were not fully equipped or supplied for combat. Even ammunition and gas masks were left behind to lighten the load. Bringing in a fully prepared force, he said, would have required more than 300 additional sorties and four more days.

Tunner followed to point out that MATS and CONARC had months, instead of days, to plan the operation. Also, by working his airplanes and people at an unsupportable pace, he reported that "the trend [of readiness] was definitely downward" in the last days of the exercise. People were simply exhausted and spare parts were running out.

The final recommendations of the national hearings were a triumph for airlift reformers and advocates of Flexible Response. On April 30, Rivers requested $335 million for 50 interim civil-type jet transports and 50 long-range C-130Es. Rivers liked the latter aircraft because it was built in the home district of his boss, Vinson, and it was the only new military-type transport immediately available with transoceanic range.

Congress ultimately appropriated $310 million to fund development of a new jet transport that became the C-141, plus 50 C-130Es and 30 C-135Bs (up-engined versions of the Boeing KC-135A tanker).

Later developments included funding for the CX-4 aircraft—producing the C-5A Galaxy—the transfer of several wings of C-97s and C-124s to the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve, and expansion of MATS peacetime flight hours and training activities.

Rivers held other airlift hearings from 1963 to 1975. They recast the Civil Reserve Airlift Fleet as a more flexible tool and got the Air Force to rename MATS as Military Airlift Command—in reflection of its strategic importance and expanded combat mobility role. Thus, until the C-17 Globemaster III replaced the C-141s in the early 2000s, the hearings organized by Rivers and Tunner set the composition and capacity of the core military airlift fleet and funded the development of important aircraft that remain in service today.

In a broader sense, the national airlift hearings revealed something interesting about how senior Air Force leaders handled unorthodox ideas and outspoken internal critics at the time. At least in the case of Tunner, service leaders seemed willing to keep him around, even to give him a series of jobs that established his credibility as a senior commander. When the flow of strategic events gave credence to his ideas, the Air Force pulled Tunner out of the headquarters staff, dusted him off, and put him at the point of a transformational process that would change fundamental elements of the national defense.

After the hearings, having suffered a heart condition for several years, Tunner retired from the Air Force but spoke and wrote frequently about airlift affairs until his death in 1983. ✪

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