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Lessons Learned, Berlin Airlift by Roger D. Launius

Airlift possesses the versatility to be employed usefully in environments other than combat. The Berlin Airlift was the first large-scale demonstration of the use of airlift in executing national policy. It set the stage for using airlift in the daily execution of US foreign policy objectives. This has been a major noncombat use of airlift since 1949, and has ensured Military

Airlift Command's (MAC) peacetime humanitarian support in times of crisis (Berlin) or natural disaster (Soviet Armenia); the support of science and technology (as in the DEEP FEEZE missions to Antarctica); or the deployment and support of UN peacekeeping forces (as the multinational force and observers in the Sinai Peninsula.

Rigorous Organization Needed

The airlift illuminated the need to throw off the milk-run mentality of the airlines and earlier military air transport operations. It proved the need to organize all aspects of the airlift operation with utmost care, and to execute with exceptional precision, in order to deliver large cargo tonnage in short time periods. Procedures, reporting systems, and communications networks so critical to the success of the Berlin Airlift have set the standards for airlift since.

The airlift demonstrated the need for larger transports able to maneuver in tight corridors and airfields. The demonstrated need for moving the most goods in the least number of missions led to the USAF search for better transport aircraft. It led directly to the C-124 Globemaster development, and indirectly to the modern transports of today.

As a corollary, the airlift also demonstrated the need for developing aircraft solely as military transports, designed for easy loading and unloading of people and goods. The C-124, with its capacity for oversize cargo and its clamshell doors permitting roll-on, roll-off capability, is an example. So are its successors, such as the C-130, C-141, C-5, and C-17.

Additionally, the airlift demonstrated the need for efficient materials handling equipment (MHE) in the aerial ports, and procedures designed to streamline the loading and unloading processes. Also, packaging techniques were shown to be ineffective. The C-54s on the airlift were loaded by hand. The creation of pallets, special MHE, and procedures to increase efficiency overcame those shortcomings. The development in the 1950s of a rigid pallet, side guide rail system was the genesis of the current 463L system.

Control by Professionals

The requirement for well-defined and tightly organized air traffic control and ground controlled approach (GCA) was realized as a result of the first hectic weeks of the Berlin Airlift. Flow patterns, rigorous enroute procedures, and the elimination of stacking over the airfield all resulted from the problems of hauling cargo into Berlin. Since then, policies and priorities have constantly sought to create smooth airlift flows and efficient terminal operations.

Finally, dedicated airlift professionals are required to control airlift assets and manage airlifts. The lack of airlift professionals contributed to early inefficiencies on the Berlin Airlift. Maj. Gen. William H. Turner contended that employment of airlift resources must be left to airlift professionals if the objectives of major airlifts were to be met. This led to the eventual establishment of MAC as the single manager for airlift, and its designation in 1977 as a specified command with worldwide, rather than theater, commitments. This necessity ultimately fostered the creation in 1987 of the US Transportation Command to consolidate all transportation organizations in a single umbrella command.

