

By John T. Correll, Editor in Chief

## Air Mobility Is an Operational Mission

ONE of the odder notions from the National Defense Panel last year was to merge US Transportation Command with the Defense Logistics Agency to form a new unified command called the US Logistics Command.

It was a bad suggestion and unlikely to be adopted. The people who framed it no doubt meant well, though. When they looked at Transportation Command, they saw it essentially as a link in the supply, distribution, and transportation chain. They wanted to make that linkage more efficient.

Their point was not altogether without merit, but their perspective was wrong. The value of logistics (which includes maintenance, supply, and acquisition of materiel) is too obvious to require explanation. The logistics mission deserves its own priority and identity. However, the same is true of the Transportation Command mission.

Although some TRANSCOM activities may closely resemble trucking, shipping, and distribution functions in the commercial sector, others—especially air mobility—go well beyond that and have a critical military element in their composition.

Air mobility consists of airlift and aerial refueling. In the Gulf War of 1991 and the limited Desert Strike operation in September 1996, it was refueling by tankers along the way that made it possible for bombers to fly nonstop from bases in the United States and deliver their ordnance in Southwest Asia. Without aerial refueling, the national strategy of rapid global response to crisis would not be possible.

Airlift is in constant demand to support forces and operations of all kinds, but it can also be an operational mission in itself. The classic example is the Berlin Airlift, of which this year begins the 50th anniversary.

In June 1948, the Soviet Union shut off road, rail, and barge access to Berlin in an attempt to force out the western powers and absorb Berlin into the Soviet sector. The only routes remaining open were

the air corridors that had been established formally by previous four-power agreement.

For more than a year, the airlift kept West Berlin alive. Every 90 seconds, another airplane touched down, bringing food and coal. In all, they made 277,000 flights into the beleaguered city, delivering 2.3 million tons of cargo. In 1949, the Russians tacitly conceded that their power play was a failure and lifted the blockade.

### **Not many military actions in the modern era rank in strategic importance with the Berlin Airlift.**

The Berlin Airlift was a great humanitarian mission, but it was more than that. It successfully defended West Berlin against takeover by a hostile military power and defeated the Soviet Union in the first big confrontation of the Cold War. There are not many military operations in the modern era that rank with it in strategic importance.

The Yom Kippur War was another instance when air mobility had strategic consequences. In October 1973, with Israel fighting desperately for survival, the United States sent Military Airlift Command to the rescue. Nine hours after receipt of orders to go, C-141s and C-5s were in the air with supplies and ammunition. They maintained Operation Nickel Grass for the next 32 days, through the end of the crisis. Later, *Reader's Digest* would call it "The Airlift That Saved Israel." Premier Golda Meir said that, "For generations to come, all will be told of the miracle of the immense planes from the United States bringing in the material that meant life for our people." It was a

dramatic example of the projection of US power and the use of the armed forces to influence global events.

Air mobility is a military occupation. Sometimes it is a combat occupation. In January 1968, US Marines at Khe Sanh were encircled and cut off by the North Vietnamese Army. The Marine outpost sat in a valley and was bombarded by intense mortar, rocket, and artillery attacks from the surrounding hills. Until the siege was broken 11 weeks later, Khe Sanh was reinforced and resupplied under fire by tactical airlifters, who took their share of battle damage in the course of 1,128 sorties into Khe Sanh.

The primary wartime role of air mobility is to get the other forces to the fight and to sustain them until sealift begins to arrive, several weeks later. Most defense analysts acknowledge that air mobility, principally airlift, is the main constraint on the nation's capability to respond to military emergencies in faraway places.

Despite a general inclination toward reductions in force structure and personnel, last year's Quadrennial Defense Review projected an increase in the requirement for strategic mobility and said that smaller US forces would be adequate only if they could be transported swiftly and over long distances.

Air mobility means global reach. On a nonstop, 8,000-mile mission last September, for example, Air Mobility Command C-17s picked up 600 airborne troops in North Carolina, met tankers operating out of Spain for refueling en route, and delivered the jumpers, bang on schedule, after 20 hours in the air to their drop zone in Kazakhstan.

In most operations, air mobility will be a leading force in support of the mission, but sometimes—as in the case of the Berlin Airlift—air mobility will be the mission.

It is a significant instrument of national power. We must take care that the focus on it is not lost through organizational realignments and mergers. ■