



1960s: Jet age arrives, along with Vietnam War

By Ian Thompson

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TRAVIS AIR FORCE BASE — Propeller-driven aircraft such as the RB-36 had given way to the jet age in the form of the B-52 Stratofortress and the F-102 Delta Daggers as Travis entered the 1960s – a decade that would see it gear up to become a hive of activity, supporting the growing conflict in Southeast Asia. The first major airlift operation for Travis came when its airlifters carried United Nations forces to the Congo between July and September 1960, and continued supporting those troops for several years.

The Berlin Crisis of 1961 saw Travis take part in exercises in Germany during that time. The next year, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, Travis' squadrons were put on alert and some were sent across the United States to support the deployment of a possible military reply to the crisis.

The first half of the decade saw a shuffle of units with two

squadrons inactivated between 1960 and 1965 while three others were either activated or assigned to the 1501st Air Transport Wing.

Three new types of air transports were assigned to Travis and two of its older aircraft types were phased out during this time. The base's last two C-97 squadrons were deactivated in 1960 and their aircraft were sent to National Guard units.

By 1963, the 1501st had six squadrons flying 100 aircraft made up of C-124s, C-130s, C-133s and C-135s, the most aircraft ever assigned to a wing at Travis.

The first jet transport to arrive at Travis was the C-135, a military transport version of the Boeing 707 airliner. The first of 17 arrived in February 1962, was assigned to the recently reactivated 44th Air Transport Squadron and sent on its first mission to Yakota Air Base, Japan.

Less than a month later, one of the C-135s rushed 38 critically ill patients from Yakota to Travis, shaving 10 minutes off the previous record for a flight from Japan to California set by a 707.

Travis also picked up half of Military Air Transport Service's most highly visible mission, the Embassy Run, where a Travis C-135 would fly across the Pacific to make stops in Asian capitals such as Saigon, New Delhi and Karachi before going as far as Saudi Arabia, where a transport from Eastern Transport Air Force would take over the mission.

In April 1963, the first of 16 turboprop C-130 Hercules joined the Travis fleet while the C-124 Globemasters, known as Old Shakey, continued to be flown at Travis. It also had the C-133 Cargomaster, whose design allowed it to transport the nation's intercontinental missiles such as the Titan, Thor, Atlas and Minuteman.

The start of air-drop training allowed Travis to put on its own

two-day Computed Air Release Point competition or “rodeo” at the nearby Winters-Davis Municipal Airport in July 1961 for C-124 aircrews between Travis and McChord Air Force Base. Travis pulled out a narrow win against the McChord aircrews.

When it came to the space program, one of the base’s C-125s carried the first Gemini space capsule to Cape Canaveral in October 1963 so it could be launched into space in January 1964.

Travis’ involvement in Vietnam included the transporting of a C-123 tactical aircraft unit from South Carolina to Tan Son Nhut Air Base in South Vietnam in September 1961, the precursor of Travis slowly becoming the major West Coast aerial port for troops and supplies going to Southeast Asia as the American military build-up expanded.

The base’s first C-141 Starlifter, the military jet specifically designed for airlift, arrived at Travis on April 23, 1965. It was nicknamed The Golden Bear and landed with Military Air Transport Service commander Gen. Howell Estes at the controls of the first operational C-141 to be assigned to an air base. Travis was also designated the Lead the Force Joint Task Force, which was responsible for the long-term evaluation of the Air Force’s C-141s.

The arrival of the C-141s meant the departure of the C-135s, which started that same year.

In 1964, Travis got involved in Operation Deep Freeze, America’s Antarctica project run by the National Science Foundation and the Navy. The mission was handed to the 86th Air Transport Squadron and its C-130s.

Lt. Col. Don Julin, then a 22nd Air Force lead navigator, said in a later interview that he was ordered in 1964 to go to New Zealand to check out the operation. Julin managed to wrangle his way all the way to the South Pole itself, where he later said he “ran around the pole 10 times in a minute so that I can now claim to

having gone around the world 14 times, four by air and 10 by foot.”

The next year, the base’s airlifters helped carry 4,000 American soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division and 7,000 tons of cargo to the Dominican Republic on the heels of the Marine Corps’ own landing the day before to occupy that country, put an end to its civil war and forestall what President Lyndon Johnson feared would be the creation of what he called “a second Cuba.”

Strategic Air Command at Travis not only got a new squadron, the 916th Air Refueling Squadron and its KC-135 air tankers as the decade opened, but also a new alert facility built on the south side of the runway that allowed the 916th fliers to be ready to fly at a moment’s notice around the clock.

Just like Military Air Transport Service, the Strategic Air Command bomber and air tanker units were put on alert during the Cuban Missile Crisis and its fighter squadron was even shipped out to Siskiyou County Airport to protect that unit in case of attack on Travis. The 82nd Fighter Squadron departed in June 1966 to allow the base to make more flight line room for more C-141s and transient aircraft.

The 916th’s workload increased as the Vietnam War heated up, starting with its first related air refueling mission taking place in 1965, when it refueled the deployment of fighter and B-52 squadrons to the western Pacific.

Aircraft from the 5th Bombardment Wing did deploy to fly missions over Southeast Asia starting in 1965, the same year that Strategic Air Command announced the wing would be inactivated in three-and-a-half years. But instead, the wing was sent to Minot Air Force Base, N.D., while the KC-135 of the 916th Air Refueling Squadron would stay at Travis.

It was the same year that Travis Senior Master Sgt. George Morar of the 84th Air Transport Squadron got a unique distinction – he became the real-life model for fictional “Steve Canyon” comic

strip character Senior Master Sgt. George Lakewood, after “Steve Canyon” creator Milton Caniff met Morar at an Air Force Association Convention and was impressed with him.

“How Caniff is going to work me in, I don’t know,” Morar said in a 1965 San Francisco Examiner interview. “He didn’t let me know anything, but the kids are looking forward to it.”

In 1966, Military Air Transport Service became the Military Airlift Command, Western Transport Air Force became the 22nd Air Force and the 1501st became the 60th Military Airlift Wing. The base’s C-130s and its older C-124s were also being sent elsewhere as they were replaced by more C-141s.

Less than a month after President Johnson promised more aid to South Vietnam in July 1965, the first of the daily C-141 channel airlift missions to Tan Son Nhut was flown on Aug. 3, 1965, hauling 44,315 pounds of priority cargo and making two refueling stops at Wake Island and Clark Air Force Base, in the Philippines, in an 18-hour mission.

In October, a program called “Fast Fly” was started and saw Travis’ flying hours significantly increase in the effort to support the American involvement there. Fast Fly did not meet the needs, so the “Red Ball Express” was started in December and added missions flown by even more aircraft, raising the amount of tonnage flown from Travis to Southeast Asia from 9,353 tons in 1966 to 19,318 tons in 1967, not only to Tan Son Nhut, but also to Da Nang and Cam Ranh Bay. In 1967 and 1968, the Bien Hoa in South Vietnam, and U Tapao, Korat and U Dorn in Thailand would be added.

“Our primary job was moving cargo from the U.S. to airfields in Vietnam, Da Nang, Cam Ranh Bay and Tan Son Nhut,” wrote 75th Military Airlift Squadron pilot Alan Baker on a website he later created. “C-130s, C-123s and C-7s delivered those loads to their final destinations at smaller airfields.”

Mission orders were pretty open-ended: get the cargo to Vietnam

and return home within a month. The aircrews would shuttle between the Philippines, Vietnam and Japan, usually getting back to Travis within six to 10 days.

“Our most rewarding mission type was medevac,” Baker wrote. “We flew injured GIs from Vietnam to hospitals in Japan for treatment and later from Japan to the U.S. for recuperation. The airplane was rigged with airline seats for guys who could walk and cots for those who couldn’t.”

Travis aircrews also took part in deploying large portions of three Army divisions to Vietnam: 2,952 troops and 4,479 tons of equipment of the 25th Infantry Division from Hawaii to Pleiku in December 1965; 10,024 paratroops and about 5,357 tons of equipment of the 101st Airborne Division to Bien Hoa in late 1967; and 4,535 soldiers and 480 tons of equipment of the 5th Infantry Division from Fort Carson, Colo., to Bien Hoa in July 1968.

That was nothing compared to the number of personnel and cargo that passed through Travis, starting with 424,824 people and 82,044 tons of cargo in 1964.

The next year, base officials declared Travis to be the busiest military air terminal in the world, outpacing the Air Force’s three East Coast terminals combined due to mounting military commitments in the Pacific.

The peak for personnel was 1969, when 1,276,165 people moved through Travis, and peak for cargo was 1967, when 259,462 tons of cargo transited the base.

Travis also became the receiving point for MAC aeromedical evacuation flights that saw thousands of wounded come back from Vietnam, peaking in February 1968, just after the Tet Offensive, when 9,299 patients came through.

The base was also the West Coast terminus for the war dead

coming back for burial. During 1968, the Travis Mortuary Affairs Office received 10,523 military caskets from Vietnam.

Reach Ian Thompson at 427-6976 or ithompson@dailyrepublic.net. Follow him on Twitter at www.twitter.com/ithompsondr.



Ian Thompson

Ian Thompson has worked for the Daily Republic longer than he cares to remember. A native of Oregon and a graduate of the University of Oregon, he pines for the motherland still. He covers Vacaville and Travis Air Force Base for the Daily Republic. He is an avid military history buff, wargamer and loves the great outdoors.