

SPARK PLUGS AND NATIONAL DEFENSE: RECALLING ROBINS AFB'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE BERLIN AIRLIFT DURING THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY OF FLIGHT CELEBRATION

On 17 December 2003, many people around the world will mark and celebrate the 100th Anniversary of Flight. Indeed, as I write, it has been less than a century since the dawn broke clear and crisp across a raised plain near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, where two young men from Dayton, Ohio, stood atop this high point of land named Kill Devil Hill. There, Orville and Wilbur Wright, renowned for their work on bicycles and gliders, prepared to launch a fragile cloth and wood stick-like craft designed much like their gliders but powered by rear-mounted propellers and two internal combustion engines. After a few abortive attempts, and with Wilbur at the controls, the “Flyer,” as it became known, briefly gained lift with its warped wings and “flew” for 120 feet. This became the first verified manned, machine-powered, heavier-than-air flight in human history.

Even though the eventual impact of this event would prove staggering, it was, in fact, performed in relative anonymity. The Wrights had chosen to make their attempt at flight before only a handful of observers to avoid the potential ridicule Dr. William Langley had absorbed only nine days earlier when his second attempt at flight failed. Since many in the media still questioned the Wrights’ achievement, the brothers repeated the flight with their improved “Flyer” in the early afternoon of 26 May 1904 on Huffman Prairie near Dayton, Ohio--this time with Orville at the controls. By the next Fall, they were making 40-foot flights that lasted 30 minutes.

From the outset, the potential military use of the “airplane” became apparent even to casual observers. Indeed, the Wrights first customer soon became the United States Army. In September 1908, the Wrights began trial flights at Fort Myer, Virginia, designed to convince the Army brass of the usefulness of their machine. Unfortunately, on 17 September, after having set an airborne endurance record of one hour and two minutes, tragedy struck. With Orville at the controls and Lt. Thomas Selfridge on board, the “Flyer” climbed to a record 125 feet where one

of its new wooden propellers split sending the craft crashing to earth. Orville broke his leg and cracked four ribs. Selfridge became the first American aviation fatality.

It was not until the next July that the trials resumed. This time Orville and Lt. (later Major General) Benjamin D. Foulois (America's first military aviator) flew ten miles from Fort Myer to Shuter's Hill near Alexandria and back at a record average speed of 42.5 miles per hour and at a 500-foot altitude. Three days later, on 2 August 1909, the Army Signal Corps officially accepted their first military flying machine. The Wright "Flyer" cost \$25,000 to which the Army added a \$5,000 bonus.

Over the next three and one-half decades this fragile little plane evolved into the greatest air armada in history. In the course of two world wars, U.S. Air Power, first supported ground forces and then decisively affected the outcome of the Second World War, eventually proving the efficacy of a separate air service. On 26 July 1947, President Harry S. Truman signed the Armed Forces Unification Act that formally created an independent Air Force as part of what became known officially as the Department of Defense (DOD) on 10 August 1949.

On 18 September 1947, the Department of the Air Force began operations when former Missouri Senator W. Stuart Symington became the first Secretary of the Air Force (SECAF) and General Carl Spaatz became the first Chief of Staff of the Air Force (CSAF). As for the people of Middle Georgia the first major and lasting effects of this change were felt on 16 February 1948 when Robins Field became Robins Air Force Base (AFB) home of the Warner Robins Air Materiel Area or WRAMA.

This air logistics depot, however, was not new to the business of maintenance and supply. Built in late 1941 and early 1942, it had been dedicated on 26 April 1943. At the height of World War II, it employed 25,000 workers who repaired nearly every component of nearly every aircraft in the Army Air Forces (AAF) inventory from the first aircraft to arrive for repair, an A-20, to the "cocooning" of B-29s in late 1945 as the war ended. The base and depot repaired thousands of bombers, fighters, and transports, sent millions of aircraft parts all over the world, and trained and deployed nearly 100,000 field repair personnel to every theater of war.

However, in the euphoria of victory, those in Middle Georgia soon realized that their beautiful big airfield might be closed. Indeed, by March 1946 only 3,900 employees remained at Robins Field. In the spring of 1948, the Cold War heated up in a place called Berlin. At the time, WRAMA's workforce managed and repaired mostly multi-engine cargo/transport aircraft, a fact that soon proved very important to U.S. foreign policy.

In the first great confrontation of the Cold War, leaders of the Soviet Union, fearing a reunified Germany, began delaying Allied road traffic between a recently unified West Germany and West Berlin on 1 April 1948. At first this semi-blockade was an annoyance but on 22 June (the seventh anniversary of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union) Soviet authorities, with no formal announcement, completely halted all barge, rail, and road traffic to the former German capital. The "Berlin Blockade" had now become a serious business that threatened armed conflict. President Truman was determined that West Berlin, at the time totally dependent on outside supplies, would not become a part of the Soviet Bloc. Hopeful of avoiding war, he turned to the fledgling Air Force to resupply West Berlin by air.

In-theater Allied military leaders assured the President that an airborne resupply of 4,500 tons per day of essential supplies could be achieved and that this would sustain the citizenry of the now beleaguered city. This, Truman hoped, would allow him to settle the conflict with diplomatic pressure instead of war. Allied leaders first turned to the European Theater air commander, Major General Curtis LeMay. He gathered as many transport assets as he could, including 102 C-47s and two C-54s. On 26 June 1948, this modest airlift force delivered the first 80 tons of supplies, mostly powdered milk, flour, and medicine. In spite of these heroic efforts, it soon became clear that these improvisational efforts were not enough and that a formal plan was needed. To this end, the Air Force created an Airlift Task Force and brought in an additional 72 larger C-54s. In late July, the Air Force put the entire program in the hands of the world's acknowledged expert on airlift, Major General William H. Tunner who had gained fame for organizing the massive airlift of supplies to China by flying the Hump.

Armed with more and better transports, Tunner designated three crews to each plane in order to begin 24-hour operations. At the height of what became known as Operation *Vittles*, Tunner had at his disposal 319 C-54s and temporary use of dozens of other transports such as the C-97 and C-82.

The role of WRAMA proved critical. With dozens of cargo aircraft, many managed and maintained at the depot, flying such a grueling schedule, parts soon began to give out. Parts resupply became an essential part of maintaining the pace of the airlift and, indeed, of carrying out the airlift at all. Throughout the fifteen months of Operation *Vittles*, WRAMA sent field teams to Germany as well as hundreds of thousands of spare parts. Specifically the WRAMA workforce refurbished and returned an average of 20,000 aircraft spark plugs each month to those in Europe. All total, they sent over 200,000 spark plugs vital to the success of the airlift. They also supplied thousands of specially constructed easy to load and unload pallets and hundreds of special parachutes designed for low-altitude deployment.

Personnel at WRAMA were also quick to respond to unforeseen needs as well. For example, on 28 January 1949, depot officials received an urgent call for the modification of 1,000 fuel pump assemblies needed to reduce fuel consumption and extend aircraft range. Within a week depot employees, working 24-hours a day, completed the modification and shipped the vital parts back to Germany. In addition, WRAMA personnel sent large numbers of props, wheels, landing gear assemblies, and dozens of other aircraft components to their fellow airmen in Europe.

Perhaps the importance of Robins AFB and WRAMA to Operation *Vittles* can be best exemplified by the fact that SECAF W. Stuart Symington, new CSAF General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, powerful Congressmen Carl Vinson (D-GA), and Senator Lyndon B. Johnson (D-TX) visited Robins AFB for high-level meetings on 16-17 April 1949. It was during these two days that the airlift reached its peak. Nicknamed the "Easter Parade," Allied planes delivered 12,940 tons of supplies on 1,398 flights during a 24-hour period from noon on 16 April to noon on 17 April. If the Soviet Union had any previous doubts about the determination of the West to save

Berlin, they were now removed. These numbers finally convinced Soviet leaders of the futility of their efforts to break the will of West Berliners. On 12 May 1949, with little fanfare, they ended the blockade. Allied leaders, fearing a resumption of the blockade, temporarily continued the airlift on a gradually reduced level in order to buildup a stock pile of essential supplies.

On 30 September 1949, the Berlin Airlift (Operation *Vittles*) officially came to an end. The last flight out of Robins had occurred only three weeks earlier. It had cost over \$200 million. Allied personnel had delivered 2,326,204 tons of supplies to West Berlin on 277,264 flights, many during the bitter winter of November 1948 through March 1949. American's alone had flown 188,998 flights and ferried 1,783,826 tons logging 600,000 flying hours and 92 million miles. But, the salvation of Berlin had not been without a price. Indeed, thirty-one American crewmen gave their lives in the defense of freedom.

Robins AFB personnel had played a major role in this contest of wills and helped prove, not only their own worth but also the efficacy of the United States Air Force. The victory in Berlin thwarted Soviet plans to dominate Europe and demonstrated Allied resolve to keep Western Europe free and democratic, especially the German Federal Republic. Ultimately, it led to the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which played such a key role in winning the Cold War in Europe.

This was not the last time Robins AFB and what is today the Warner Robins Air Logistics Center (WR-ALC) would play an integral role in world events. During the Korean War Robins personnel “de-cocooned” hundreds of “mothballed” B-29s stored on base and put them into service again. During the Second Indochina War, Robins employees were, among other things, the focal point of the Southeast Asia Pipeline and managers of the modification of old cargo aircraft such as the C-47, C-119 and C-130 into side-firing fixed-wing gunships.

In the 1970s they spearheaded the modification of what General Tunner called the Air Force's “workhorse,” the

C-141A, creating the stretched C-141B with aerial refueling capabilities. Over the past 20 plus years, Robins has become one of the avionics and high technology centers of the Air Force, later providing crucial logistics, maintenance, and avionics support to U.S. forces during Operations *Desert Shield/Storm*, *Allied Force* and *Enduring Freedom*.

In the nearly 100 years since that brief flight in North Carolina, a flight shorter than the wing-span of a C-5 *Galaxy* Cargo Aircraft (managed at Robins AFB), American Air Power has become the most decisive component of U.S. national defense. Indeed, the Air Force has become the centerpiece of U.S. efforts to preserve world peace and human dignity both as a weapon of righteous lethality and as an instrument of humanitarian aid and salvation.

Throughout the 60 years of Robins AFB and WR-ALC, the workforce has been at the center of this evolution of aviation and Aerospace Power. And, if one needs an example, they need only look back to those 18 critical months in 1948-1949 when the world stood perched on the brink of a third world war and the men and women of Robins and the rest of the Air Force carried the torch of peace and freedom. To be sure, if Europe is free and prosperous today it is, in large part, due to those spark plugs which then, as now, fulfilled not only the Wrights' vision of military aviation but the WR-ALC pledge to always "Keep 'Em Flying."

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Unloading C-47s during the first weeks' of the Berlin Airlift



West Berlin children waiting for the pilots to drop candy as they land at Templehof Airfield in Berlin. It was one of the most dangerous approaches in the world according to one veteran pilot.



Orville Wright in 1909



Wilbur Wright in 1909



General Carl Spaatz the first
Chief of Staff of the United
States Air Force



A Modern Day C-141



President Harry S. Truman who signed the legislation to form the Separate United States Air Force in 1947.



Powerful Georgia Congressman Carl Vinson, 1949



The main gate at Robins Field in the fall of 1943.