



Operation Nickel Grass, Military airlift as a vehicle for air diplomacy and conflict resolution

military-Earth thinking notebook

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The Allied airlift over Berlin between 1948 and 1949 underlined the importance of air transport in conflict resolution. The military effect to be achieved, even if it is not offensive in this case, is part of a dual logic of force projection and power projection. It is in fact consistent with the political objective defined in advance, designed to draw back the adversary or restore a deteriorated military situation.

Less well known than Operation Vittles [1], Operation Nickel Grass, carried out in 1973 by the US Military Airlift Command (MAC), is the first of its kind in the world. operation, carried out in 1973 by the US MAC (Military Airlift Command) in support of the operations carried out by the Israelis to counter the Syrian-Egyptian offensive of October 1973, is part of the same logic.

At a time when, in the field of military airlift, France and a number of our European partners are preparing for the arrival of the A400M, and when a new generation of military airlift is being developed, it is essential that we take the necessary steps to ensure that it can be used in the most efficient way possible. is under way to set up a multinational command structure, the EATC[2], the lessons learned from Operation Nickel Grass are far from negligible.

Indeed, one can legitimately question the use of the transport capacity offered by this new aircraft, the advisability of equipping it with an in-flight refuelling boom and the sharing of operational control within a supranational entity.

A reminder of the facts will make it possible to understand the involvement and the role played by American military air transport in the Yom Kippur War and will open up some lines of thought on the arrival of the A400M in the forces.

1) Name given to the air bridge over Berlin between 1948 and 1949.

2) EATC: European air transport command,

The Facts

October 1973. The whole world once again has its eyes fixed on the Middle East. Six years after their humiliating defeat in the Six Day War, Egypt and Syria take the initiative of an attack on Israel.

Surprise in the Western camp, even if the involvement of the American administration in this affair is still the subject of divergent analyses^[1]. The intensity and violence of the fighting is rapidly depleting the ammunition stockpiles of the various belligerents.

From the very first hours of the conflict, the Soviets set up an air bridge to support the Syrian-Egyptian coalition. A ballet of Antonov 12 and Antonov 22 ensures a supply of ammunition and spare parts.

For their part, the United States will initially favor the diplomatic route, hoping for a rapid end to hostilities. But very quickly it appeared that an honourable outcome for Israel could not be envisaged, given the unfavourable military balance of power in the first days of the conflict.

In view of the urgency of the situation, a supply by sea, which is too slow, is ruled out. Only transport aircraft can guarantee the rapid delivery of the US-origin military equipment needed by Israel to launch its counter-offensive, scheduled for 10 October. On the same day, rotations carried out by the airliners of the Israeli national airline El Al bring a first supply of ammunition but at the same time underline the unsuitability of these aircraft, dedicated to passenger transport, loading and transport of military equipment.

As early as 6 October, the MAC planned to organize an air bridge between the United States and the Jewish State, but it was not until the 13th, a week after the start of the fighting, that President Nixon approved its realization.

The following day, 14 October, a C5 Galaxy landed in Tel Aviv, and Operation Nickel Grass had just begun.

"Send everything that can fly" (President Richard Nixon)

It had therefore taken the American administration a week to make up its mind, hesitating to commit its transport aircraft, fearing that too visible support would have consequences for its relations with the other countries in the region, particularly the oil monarchies in the Gulf.

The same logic led all European countries to prohibit American aircraft involved in the operation from flying over their territories. Only Portugal, after much negotiation, authorised the use of the Lajes airfield in the Azores archipelago.

The planning of such a transport operation, carried out within an excessively short timeframe, faced several challenges. Identifying and assembling equipment from the United States and from depots in Europe, ensuring the safety of the aircraft as they flew over the Mediterranean and guaranteeing delivery in the shortest possible time.

In the field of air transit, the solution chosen was to use the Azores as an intermediate stopover. At the height of the operations, 1,300 American military personnel were deployed there to provide the necessary support for the 30 to 40 daily rotations of large C5 and C141 aircraft.

Six hours of flight time separated the east coast of the United States from the Lajès airfield; seven hours were then needed to reach Tel Aviv.

Overflying the Mediterranean could not be carried out using conventional air routes, given the obvious hostility of Arab countries and the refusal to allow them to fly over European countries. The route chosen was through the Strait of Gibraltar and followed a direct route south of Crete before turning towards Tel Aviv. Security on this critical part of the route was ensured by the US 6th Fleet ^{and its} fighter aircraft. The route taken by the aircraft was thus marked out by US Navy warships, up to 150 nautical miles from the coast of the Jewish State, where Israeli fighters took over.

Unloading at airfields located at the height of hostilities, less than 200 kilometres from the fighting, was carried out by Israeli reservists and civilians. Due to a lack of suitable means, it took nearly four hours to manually unload the 56 tonnes of ammunition carried by the first C5 on 14 October. Means of unloading were then put in place, reducing this time to about 30 minutes.

14 October 1973, opening of the airlift by a C5 Galaxy at Lodd airfield, Tel Aviv.

Once the device had been well established, an Israeli soldier could use equipment on the front line less than four hours after landing in an American plane. [2].

"war is a transport operation. The best carrier will win " (Winston Churchill).

The airlift lasted 32 days. The 421 missions carried out by the C141s allowed the transport of 11,632 tons of cargo, an average of 28 tons per rotation. The C5 carried out 145 missions, ensuring the delivery of 10,673 tons, an average of 73 tons per rotation.

Described 5 years earlier as a pharaonic project, often criticized by its detractors, the C5 Galaxy carried half of the total cargo, completing only a quarter of the missions, revealing to the world the superiority of the US transport aviation. A few weeks later, Mrs Golda Meir, Israeli Prime Minister, will testify to the American people the gratitude of future generations towards these huge planes whose cargoes had saved Israel.

Comparative balance of American and Soviet airlift during the Yom Kippur War[3]

In the face of the American organization, the Soviet reply is pale in comparison. The 935 missions of Antonov 12 and 22 identified by the American intelligence services allow to estimate at 15,000 tons the aid brought to the Syrian-Egyptian coalition, over a period of 40 days (Soviet aid began on October 6, 1973). Benefiting however from a more favourable environment, only 1,700 nautical miles separated the USSR from the theatre of operations, the Russians did not have a transport capacity comparable to that offered by the American C5 and C141.

What lessons could be learned?

This operation will have a lasting impact on the operation of American military airlift, both in terms of its structures and equipment and the development of its doctrine.

Until these events, the MAC, which until then had devoted its resources to supporting operations in Vietnam, benefited from a solid network of support bases in the Pacific Ocean (Hickam, Wake, Kwajalein), Japan and the Philippines. Conversely, the absence of an American base in the Atlantic Ocean revealed the dependence of the United States on

its allies on these oceanic routes.

The C141 (Version A, at that time), was not able to directly rally Israel from US territory. The C5 was able to carry 33 tonnes directly, which, in terms of volume transported, would have required 659 rotations. Without access to the Portuguese facilities at Lajes, the airlift would not have been able to ensure the same volume of supplies to Israel within the same timeframe, and the outcome of the Yom Kippur War could have been quite different.

Aware of these shortcomings, and of the need for autonomous projection capabilities, the Americans will develop the air-to-air refuelling capacity of their fleet of strategic aircraft and adapt the volume of their tanker fleet accordingly. A 1975 American study shows that systematic recourse to air-to-air refuelling during Operation Nickel Grass would have made it possible to significantly reduce the number of rotations (nearly a hundred), at the cost of an adapted fleet of tanker aircraft.

The C141 will thus be retrofitted for the entire fleet. Available from 1979, the C141B with its extended fuselage will be equipped with in-flight refueling capability.

Put into service in 1969, the C5 was equipped as standard with in-flight refuelling capability. Abnormal structural fatigue on the wing roots had precluded its use. A new wing was to be developed and put into service starting in the early 1980s on this aircraft.

The Soviets also learned from the American demonstration. The development of strategic aircraft of classes equivalent to the C141 and C5 dates from this period. The Ilyushin 76 completed its tests in 1976 and entered into service in the Aeroflot in 1978. The Antonov 124 made its first flight in 1982.

What lessons for Europe and the A400M?

The future Airbus A400M has certain similarities with the C141A in terms of its expected performance, particularly in terms of the load offered. Whether or not to equip this new aircraft with an in-flight refuelling boom is above all a matter of political ambition.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the autonomy and performance of the project that would give birth to the C160 Transall destined it for a central European and Mediterranean theatre, in line with our centres of interest at that time.

Fifty years later, the balance of power has changed. Our defence is now played out far from our borders, as demonstrated by our commitment in Afghanistan. In this age of globalisation, it is the Oekumene who now awaits the future transport crews.

It is therefore important to give the A400M the means to free itself from the oceans or airspace over which it would be forbidden to fly. In-flight refuelling is the means to guarantee this necessary extension. Our decision-makers must take this dimension into account, and the consequences of calling this capability into question. It must also be accompanied by the simultaneous development of tanker aircraft fleets, the pooling of which at European level should be envisaged beyond the ATARES protocol.^[4] in effect for the past few years.

The acquisition by many European countries of the A400M and their pooling within a multinational command, as envisaged by the EATC, will ultimately require a remarkable transport capability. Only the United States will have a greater instantaneous transport

capability. Air transport will then become a means for Europe to display its foreign policy ambitions, whether for humanitarian aid, response to an emergency situation (tsunami, earthquake, etc.) or purely military action.

This asset will contribute de facto to strengthening the coherence of the ESDP, the European Security and Defence Policy, the contours of which the Community Europe is struggling to define.

Conclusion

Operation Nickel Grass demonstrated the ability of the U.S. Air Force to support the war effort of a country nearly 13,000 kilometers away in a very short period of time. Underscoring the indispensable need to provide strategic aircraft fleets with air-to-air refueling capability, it is in keeping with the U.S. logic of power and intervention.

The MAC, oriented at the time on the war effort in Vietnam, became in a few weeks with its emblematic C5 and C141 the vector of the American foreign policy.

France and some of its European allies were preparing to welcome the A400M, and were going to offer Europe's defence a remarkable transport capacity. The in-flight refuelling capability would increase its range and strengthen our independence from other powers.

While the undecided may point to the difficulty of making such a transport capability profitable in the future on a day-to-day basis, it is now important to move beyond national logics to a European approach. The A400M will give Europe's defence system its wings, providing it with the means to achieve its ambitions in the field of air transport.

1) See on this subject "Penser les ailes françaises, Special issue of 26 September 2006, speech by General Pierre Gallois", page 18.

2) Source: Operation Nickel grass, Airlift in support of national policy, Capt Chris Krisinger, USAF, Airpower journal, 1989.

3) source: Airlift doctrine, Lt Col Charles MILLER, Airpower research institute, March 1988, page 344.

4) ATARES: air transport and air refueling and other exchange of service, protocol signed in February 2001.

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