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CANADIAN AIR POWER IN THE CONGO

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CANADIAN AIR POWER IN THE CONGO

AIM

1. The aim is to examine the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) contribution to the UN Operation in the Congo (ONUC) from 1960 to 1964. Historical reflection of the employment of air power in ONUC highlights key lessons learned by the RCAF that should inspire future contributions. There was a large dependency on RCAF leadership and expertise for the formation of the UN Air Transport Force (UNATF). It is was this unique contribution of key RCAF personnel, rather than its air assets that led to effects at the strategic, operational and tactical level and ultimately contributed to the success of UN's inaugural Air Force. This paper will look at the historic perspective to inspire the Canadian Forces (CAF) mandate within Strong, Secure and Engage (SSE) to support future peacekeeping missions in the contemporary environment.

INTRODUCTION

2. Clausewitz's emphasis on the importance of critical analysis to examining history remains relevant and lessons can be learned in the analysis of past RCAF contributions; these lessons may help shape its future participation in the contemporary environment.¹ Almost sixty years have passed since the RCAF's contribution to ONUC and the lessons learned have long been forgotten.² The intent here is to reflect on this important campaign and recall the key lessons that were learned by its leadership to guide the RCAF in its future contributions to the

¹ Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 156.

² A. Walter Dorn, "Chapter 2 Peacekeepers in Combat: Fighters Jets and Bombers in the Congo, 1961-1963." In *Air Power in UN Operations Wings for Peace*, ed. A. Walter Dorn, 17-40 (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014), 32.

UN. ONUC is still touted as being the most significant mission undertaken by the UN during the Cold War and initially intended to bring law and order to the Congo, following its abrupt independence from Belgium in 1960.³ Today, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) still presents significant challenges and it appears that little has changed since 1960. It remains, as described by Tim Marshall, a victim of its mineral wealth that continues to be exploited by outsiders with little chance of stability following the brutal Belgian rule.⁴ It challenged geography and strained infrastructure continues to demand a robust use of air power and a lesson that the UN learned quickly in its initial mission.

3. During its first attempt in the Congo, the UN mission offered support to the first democratically elected Congolese government against instability of uprisings from the Congolese National Army. What began as a stabilization mission soon evolved in dealing with threats of cessation by Katanga province compounded by a mandate change to support the democratically elected DRC government following the death of the UN Secretary-General.⁵ It was clear from the onset of the mission, that the immense challenge of deploying UN military troops and equipment in extremely challenging terrain would require a heavy reliance on air transport.⁶ However, the mission quickly turned into “an aerial arms race” following the efforts by Moïse Tshombé, Katangese leader, who secured air power for the Force Aérienne Katangaïse (FAK),

³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁴ Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography: Ten Maps That Tell You Everything You Need to Know About Global Politics*, (London: Elliott & Thompson Limited, 2015).

⁵ A. Walter Dorn, “Chapter 2 Peacekeepers in Combat: Fighters Jets and Bombers in the Congo, 1961-1963.” In *Air Power in UN Operations Wings for Peace*, ed. A. Walter Dorn, 17-40 (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014), 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

which managed to initially gain air supremacy through the use of one Fouga Magistrate and essentially created a deadlock in the mission by grounding UN air assets.⁷

DISCUSSION

Strategic level

4. When the ONUC mission mandate concluded in June 1964, it had seen an impressive 93,000 troops deployed, took 127 casualties, 133 wounded, with a presence of over 20,000 troops during its peak and spent over US\$400,000,000.⁸ From the political perspective, Canada's reputation in UN peacekeeping in the 1950's made it a natural candidate for a special request by the Secretary-General to provide RCAF air transport assets and run the UN's air operations together with long-range communications in the Congo.⁹ At the strategic level, it was clear that the UN Secretary-General understood that Canada had little appetite for sending its standby battalion into the Congo; Diefenbaker's government was concerned with the dangers of sending ground troops into an unknown conflict with many foreign interests.¹⁰ Additionally, there was also recognition that a NATO aligned force would only threaten the conflict towards a proxy war between the United States and Russia, naturally there was little appetite at the political level in supporting a large Canadian troop contribution into a possible cold war sideshow.¹¹

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁸ William K. Carr, "Chapter 1 Planning, Organizing, and Commanding the Air Operation in the Congo, 1960," In *Air Power in UN Operations Wings for Peace*, ed. A. Walter Dorn, 3-16 (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014), 3.

⁹ William K. Carr, "The RCAF in the Congo, 1960," *Canadian Aviation History Society Journal* (Spring 2005), 5.

¹⁰ Kevin A. Spooner, "Chapter 3 A Fine Line: Use of Force, the Cold War, and Canada's Air Support for the UN Organization in the Congo," In *Air Power in UN Operations Wings for Peace*, ed. A. Walter Dorn, 41-58 (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014), 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

5. Sharing concerns with respect to Cold War dynamics, the Secretary-General agreed on the proposal from External Affairs Canada to the provision of food, supplies and the required air transport to the Congo with a clear mandate to provide humanitarian support.¹² Some controversy arose in Canada, when the Secretary-General requested expansion of the initial mission to the use of air assets to transport troops into the Congo and thus changing the mandate into one for combat support. Although there was indication that this was already being done without consent from Canada, there was insistence from Ottawa that the Canadian air assets were only to be used as originally intended.¹³ In the fall of 1962, austerity measures due to an economic crisis at home finally forced the government to draw back of RCAF air assets from the mission.¹⁴ In the end, RCAF air assets had flown over 392 flights and had moved over four million pounds of freight and 11,746 passengers.¹⁵ The overall strategic environment of the time and the political will is a key reminder of the type of considerations that must be balanced when considering a mandate in the UN.

6. However, it is clear from the literature that air power was not the most significant contribution from Canada; it was rather the Command personnel within ONUC Headquarters (HQ), such as the Chief Operations Officer, Chief Signals Office and Chief Air Officer.¹⁶ Canadians were selected for language abilities, political neutrality, extensive peacekeeping experience, familiarity with regulations, and professionalism.¹⁷ The Initial arrival of the RCAF was marked by the arrival of Air Commodore (A/C) F.S. Carpenter; upon his return a request for

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁵ T.G. Coughlin, "The UN and the RCAF," *Roundel* 16, 10 (December 1964), 2.

¹⁶ Kevin A. Spooner, "Chapter 3 A Fine Line: Use of Force, the Cold War, and Canada's Air Support for the UN Organization in the Congo," In *Air Power in UN Operations Wings for Peace*, ed. A. Walter Dorn, 41-58 (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014), 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

additional RCAF personnel was quickly generated by Secretary-General in order to fill key positions in the UN HQ.¹⁸ Group Captain W.K. Carr, now known as the father of the modern RCAF, was dispatched together with ten RCAF specialists to serve at Force HQ and began leading the efforts to form the first UN Air Transport Force (ATF).¹⁹ In July 1961, another RCAF milestone was reached through the arrival of Air Commodore H.A Morrison, who was assigned as the ONUC's Air Commander and touted as one of the most experienced air transport specialists in the RCAF.²⁰ At the operational level, the RCAF expertise was absolutely critical in the successful stand-up of the inaugural UNATF and demonstrated that a small contingent of eleven RCAF officers could make a monumental difference.

7. Politically, it demonstrated that Canada could be relied upon to offer expertise and enable operations as it had done in past UN missions through leadership within the UNATF. There were political concerns about providing leadership to an evolving combat mission as the conflict against Katanga ramped up and created uncertainty towards supporting the mission at the strategic level. However, in the end, on the insistence of the Secretary-General and weighing the political fallout of an early withdrawal of key leadership, External Affairs advised to continue supporting the mission.²¹ This highlighted the continued friction between the UN and Canadian government and foreshadows key lessons of the larger politics at play in UN peacekeeping operations. It is a reminder that the dynamics considered at the strategic level aim to balance the

¹⁸ Kevin Spooner, *Canada, the Congo Crisis, and UN Peacekeeping, 1960-64* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2009), 87.

¹⁹ Kevin A. Spooner, "Chapter 3 A Fine Line: Use of Force, the Cold War, and Canada's Air Support for the UN Organization in the Congo," In *Air Power in UN Operations Wings for Peace*, ed. A. Walter Dorn, 41-58 (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Ltd., 2014), 50.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

commitment of limited assets, with the strategic and political advantage they would offer to Canada in supporting its foreign policy objectives.

Operational Level

8. At the operational level, the UNATF sought empowerment to control of external airlift and operational and control of internal airlift.²² The UNATF was also responsible for air traffic control, running of facilities and supporting the ONUC commander in the execution of his mandate.²³ Upon his arrival, Group Captain Carr immediately set forward to draft Terms of Reference to ensure he had the appropriate authorities assigned directly by the ONUC commander.²⁴ He also ensured that he was a direct report to the Supreme Commander with clear exceptions established for specific projects in support of brigades.²⁵ Carr was clearly empowered by the Supreme Commander to direct all ONUC air operations and to advise the Supreme Commander on all matters pertaining to air operations in the Congo.²⁶ The internal airlift would require supporting all UN military and civilian personnel and material transport within the Congo. Beyond the regular demands, there was also a requirement to enable rapid deployment, to ensure battalion group of infantry were able to extinguish any conflict spots within the country; this presented challenges in ad-hoc use of air power.²⁷ In establishing clear guidance through issuing an organizational order, Group Captain Carr ensured that he had clearly

²² William K. Carr, "The RCAF in the Congo, 1960," *Canadian Aviation History Society Journal* (Spring 2005), 4.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁴ Carl Carson von Horn, *ONUC Air Staff Organization Orders* (1 Canadian Air Division Winnipeg: file CarrCO), 12 September 1960.

²⁵ William K. Carr, *The Requirement and Organization for the ONUC Air Transport Force*, (1 Canadian Air Division Winnipeg: file Carr CO), 15 September 60, 6.

²⁶ Carl Carson von Horn, *ONUC Air Staff Organization Orders*, 12 September 1960.

²⁷ William K. Carr, *The Requirement and Organization for the ONUC Air Transport Force*, (1 Canadian Air Division Winnipeg: file Carr CO), 15 September 60, 7.

established Operational Level Command and Control (C2) structures to enable oversight over a large UNATF.²⁸

9. Carr's success in establishing clear C2 relationships and enacting standard operating policies to guide subordinate commanders continues to elude contemporary UN air operations. As highlighted by Nocosseloff, UN Air Operations continue to be plagued with issues of robust C2 structures, an absence of clear air doctrine and standard operating principles that can help provide guidance to countries.²⁹ As it was in ONUC, today's UN operations face similar problems with chronic shortages of air assets, aging capabilities that are not interoperable with other nations, and shortages of key military staff within UN HQ.³⁰ Although many capabilities have been introduced over the years, and some progress has been made in the effective employment of air assets, there is a requirement to continue advancing the development of doctrine and operating procedures to enhance the operational effectiveness of limited air assets.

Tactical Level

10. Almost immediately, the UNATF encountered its initial challenges in the stand-up of an effective air traffic control that could cover the vast areas over the Congo. On their departure, the Belgians had essentially abandoned the air navigation and communications systems and failed to train any Congolese.³¹ Carr also recalled of instances where some of the equipment was vandalized and sabotaged. To resolve the issue, Carr reached back to the RCAF and the

²⁸ William K. Carr, *Appendix C ONUC Air HQ Organizational Order 1/60 United National Air Transport Base N'Djili*, (1 Canadian Air Division Winnipeg: file Carr CO), 15 September 60.

²⁹ Alexandra Nocosseloff, "Keeping Peace from Above: Air Assets in UN Peace Operations." *International Peace Institute* (October 2017): 23.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ William K. Carr, *The Requirement and Organization for the ONUC Air Transport Force*, (1 Canadian Air Division Winnipeg: file Carr CO), 15 September 60, 8.

International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and was able to get a few bilingual air traffic controllers to overcome the deficiency.³² Another challenge lay with the limited number of RCAF staff at UNATF, who were stretched and often resorted to shortcuts to overcome the demands on their time.³³ Perhaps the most challenging aspect of UNATF was to manage the diverse number of obsolete aircrafts that were delivered to the UNATF. Seventeen DC-3's along with five C-119s had been rescued from NATO war reserves in Europe, and some had been out of service for over a decade.³⁴ In addition to this, there were a mixed number of rotary wing, Beaver and Otter aircrafts re-assigned from other UN missions. With over 13 different types of aircraft, many of them obsolete, there were significant challenges in obtaining spare parts, which completely stretched the UN support system; as Carr recalled, "[it] was simply not geared for this kind of operation."³⁵

11. This was overshadowed by the significant issue of having aircrew and ground crew from 11 different nations with no qualifications to speak of. As Carr would later remark "[they] soon discovered [they] had pilots who had never flown the types of aircraft [they] had inherited and mechanics who were not qualified to fix them."³⁶ Carr recalls overcoming this formidable challenge through quickly implementing innovative solutions in the field. His team would quickly set forward start conversation courses on numerous aircraft and would routinely do pilot checks.³⁷ Flight safety was also implemented to ensure enhanced airworthiness and flight checks

³² *Ibid.*

³³ William K. Carr, "The RCAF in the Congo, 1960," *Canadian Aviation History Society Journal* (Spring 2005), 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

were conducted using RCAF standards and evaluation criterion.³⁸ Other forces, such as the Indians and the Italians, maintained their own assets and qualified their own aircrew and ground crew.³⁹ Within a matter of few months the UNATF had achieved remarkable operational effect, with over 11 countries flying 13 different aircraft types, with a total force of 78 aircraft.⁴⁰ Carr and his team had achieved the impossible and delivered an air power capability under impossible odds. Carr would later recall, “[d]espite the differences in operational techniques, flying standards and discipline only one incident arose requiring the removal of a senior officer from command of a squadron.”⁴¹

12. Contemporary standards and regulations would pose significant challenges in duplicating Carr’s qualification and standards efforts within ONUC, compared to modern Airworthiness regulations and ICAO Standards and Recommended Practices.⁴² However, the ability to establish a baseline standard through pre-existing mechanisms such as ICAO, UN Aviation Standards for Peacekeeping and Humanitarian Air Transport Operations, UN Air Operations Manual, UN Aviation Safety Manual and UN Peacekeeping Missions Military Aviation Unit Manual all require nations that contribute air assets to abide by the stringent compliance for airworthiness accreditation prior to making a commitment to the UN. In this respect, the expectations that began in ONUC have long evolved, and the contemporary environment offers expectations that must be met. However, as Shelton-Smith highlights, given the present nature of conflicts, the UN is forced to employ air power from remote areas with limited to no infrastructure and there is a

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴² Alexandra Nocosseloff, “Keeping Peace from Above: Air Assets in UN Peace Operations,” *International Peace Institute* (October 2017): 11.

continued demand on ingenuity and expertise that was familiar to the UNATF team supporting ONUC.⁴³

CONCLUSION

13. Within SSE, the strategic direction from the Canadian government is clear and provides the CAF with impetus to seriously consider a commitment to peace support operations in the near horizon. It would be futile to not look at past UN commitments in order to maximize the level of impact that could be achieved at the strategic, operational and tactical levels. This paper demonstrated that there is a lesson to be learned in looking at past RCAF contributions to foreshadow its contributions in a contemporary environment. The modest RCAF contribution to the UN as part of ONUC in the DRC in the 1960s provided an early example of Canadian ingenuity that had an impact at the political, operational and tactical level. It clearly demonstrated that from an air power perspective, Canada could have a significant impact with a very modest contribution of eleven Canadians in the UNATF. This contribution of key leadership and expertise at the operational level was able to gain Canada great credibility at the international stage under impossible odds. Considering the challenges faced by the UN presently as highlighted by Nocoseloff, there is a clear need for expertise in delivering effective air power. It is a reminder that air power is not always about the sheer number of air assets, but rather the expertise to enable it that can have the greatest impact to a mission.

⁴³ Kevin Shelton-Smith, "Chapter 16 Advances in Aviation for UN Peacekeeping: A View from UN Headquarters," In *Air Power in UN Operations: Wings for Peace*, ed. A. Walter Dorn, 285-295 (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2014), 286.

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