

168 MILITARY AIRLIFT GROUP

MISSION

LINEAGE

168 Air Transport Group activated, 16 Feb 1964

Redesignated 168 Military Airlift Group, 1 Jan 1966

Inactivated, 17 Sep 1967

STATIONS

Olmsted AFB in Middletown, PA

ASSIGNMENTS

WEAPON SYSTEMS

Mission Aircraft

Support Aircraft

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

On 16 February 1964 168th Air Transport Group was extended federal recognition. The mission of the 168th was modified to include the transporting of material and supplies in addition to the aeromedical transportation mission.

Prior to 1964, units were squadrons with their various support functions called elements. With the Group designation, the supporting elements became squadrons.

In addition to the 168th Air Transport Group, these squadrons were also established on 16 February 1964:

168th Support Squadron — Major Clarence Withers — responsible for Group administrative and personnel, air police, and dining activities.

168th Materiel Squadron — Captain Neil B. Bentz — was the result of a merger of the supply and maintenance elements.

140th Aeromedical Evacuation Flight — consisted of flight nurses and aeromedical technicians.

Another highlight of 1964 occurred on 23 July 1964 when ground was broken at the west end of Olmsted Air Force Base for the construction of a \$446,000 aircraft maintenance dock for the 168th, the first building construction ever authorized for the unit in its seventeen year history.

Because the wing span of the C-121 was too great to fit into building S-300, most maintenance was performed outside. The new dock would allow for inside maintenance. Actually the maintenance dock building was the first phase of a \$4,386,000 building program planned for Olmsted during 1964-65. Other buildings planned for the Air National Guard included a second maintenance dock, a base supply building plus an operations and training building.

Conditions at Olmsted Air Force Base were crowded at best, and the 168th still had facilities scattered from one end of the base to the other. In order to have sufficient classroom space and adequate training facilities, the Group's support, supply, and aircraft maintenance squadrons plus the dispensary attended a summer encampment 24 July through 7 August 1965 at Otis Air Force Base in Massachusetts. The air crews and the aeromedical flight did not participate as their annual training requirement was accomplished when they supplemented official Air Force missions throughout the year.

The 168th announced that it was about to expand operational missions and voluntarily participate in active Air Force aeromedical evacuation operations. The missions were to begin in August 1965 with the airlifting of patients in the Caribbean.

The calendar wasn't the only thing changed on 1 January 1966... the 168th Air Transport Group was redesignated as the 168th Military Airlift Group with an authorized strength at 900 members.

Despite all of the "real world" missions, some 400 support personnel of the 168th found time to attend a two-week summer encampment in August at the Air Guard Training Site at Otis Air Force Base in Cape Cod. This was the second consecutive year annual field training was held at Otis AFB

because of its abundance of classroom space and other facilities for specialized training. Again, Lt. Col. Clarence Withers was the Detachment Commander.

Lt. Col. Nicholas Bereschak, Group Commander, praised the group members "who gave so freely of their time in the missions flown during the past year (1966). We feel that this is indeed an outstanding military accomplishment for a reserve organization."

In addition to this award, the 168th also received an Operational Readiness Award as well as the Military Airlift Command Award for ten years of accident-free flying. Winning that ten-year safe flying award was indeed an accomplishment to be proud of as some 5% million air miles were flown and over 32,000 flying hours logged. This enviable record reached back to 1956 and included F-51, C-46, C-119, and C-121. One more award was earned by the 168th . . . the Tiger Award was given the unit by the 140th Military Airlift Squadron for flying material into the war zone, unloading, and departing in minimal times.

By November 1966, the fate of Olmsted Air Force Base became clear. The active AF base was slated to be closed by mid 1969. It was announced that the federal government would give the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania 643 acres of land that constituted the majority of the south complex of the base for use as a commercial airport. , there were 45 acres in the center of the complex determined to be of a high industrial potential and was to be sold to rather than given gratis to the state. The Harris-burg Area Industrial Development Corporation purchased that area for \$700,000.

1967 This was to be another year for dramatic change in the life of the 168th Military Airlift Group. The unit would see yet another mission change as well as a relocation within the base complex.

Meanwhile, members of the 168th celebrated twenty years of service in the Air National Guard by accepting a "Citation of Merit" from the National Guard Association. The unit was recognized for "its magnificent airlift support of the U.S. Armed Forces in Southeast Asia and around the world." Major Richard E. Meyers of Lancaster, who had flown the most missions to Southeast Asia, accepted the award in Washington D.C. on 27 February 1967 on behalf of the unit's members. A total of 26 Air National Guard units were cited for their airlift efforts without being activated into federal service.

But the Washington visit was not just for celebrating. Earlier in the year the Defense Department had announced plans to phase transport units out of the Air National Guard system. two congressional leaders, Representative L. Mendal Rivers, Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, and Senator John C. Stennis called the move to eliminate the transport unit "ridiculous" and pledged to fight the plan. Senator Stennis declared, "These (air transport) units have accomplished 60% as much as they would have if the units had been called to full-time active duty. We get more from the Guard and Reserve dollar than we do from any other military dollar spent." The Senator comforted the units by saying he believed Congress would not agree to

the proposed reduction in Guard and Reserve units. He said, "The only way to maintain the nation's security is through a well-trained Reserve component."

Another significant event in the phase-out of the Olmsted Air Force Base occurred on Sunday, 1 July 1967, when the ceremonial key to the base as well as jurisdiction of the airfield was turned over to the Pennsylvania Aeronautics Commission in a public ceremony. The Federal Aviation Administration began operation of the control tower and other navigation facilities at the newly-named Olmsted State Airport in keeping with the name of the facility for the past fifty years. The official title transfer of the premises took place 22 June in Governor Shafer's office.

With regular Air Force activity on the decline, summer camp gave 168th members the perfect opportunity to expand into more comfortable office and training facilities. All of the squadrons took annual field training 29 July through 12 August with the exception of the 168th USAF Dispensary which took its 19 members to annual training at Andrews Air Force Base, Washington, D.C., to assist the regular Air Force medical personnel in handling incoming casualties from Southeast Asia.

By this time the Group's aircraft inventory included eight C-121 and one C-54.

On 6 September 1967, three Super Connies of the 168th were placed on a standby alert status for civil disturbance support. The National Guard Bureau ordered restricted duty for the C-121s to assure prompt movement of Army National Guardsmen from training camps if they would be needed to quell civil disorders.

Along about this time, the Secretary of Defense set about realigning and reequipping the strategic airlift forces which were contained in the Military Air Transport Service, the gaining command of the 168th Military Airlift Group.

The planning and programming of the new force (to be named the Military Airlift Command) would consist of an all-jet fleet: C-141s just coming off the line, the new C-5A then in the design stages, and the C-9 Nightingale, all backed up by the Civil Reserve Air Fleet.

All conventional powered transport aircraft in the active, reserve, and national guard forces were to be phased out over a three to five year period.

The 168th Military Airlift Group, because it was located at Olmsted Air Force Base (which the Department of Defense ordered closed in November 1964) was one of the first three Air National Guard airlift units programmed for inactivation to occur in fiscal year 1967.

Other Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve transport units were to be similarly treated. Therefore, in the beginning of 1965, the 168th was in double trouble.

The first order of business was to secure a home for the organization, and intense effort was immediately directed toward securing Olmsted Air Force Base as a commercial-civil airport.

The first plan to accomplish this goal was developed by the Headquarters Pennsylvania Air National Guard in coordination with 168th personnel.

This was presented to the Adjutant General who was also the Chairman of the Pennsylvania Aeronautics Commission, the agency which operated five state owned airports. From there, the plan went to the Governor who gave his approval for the state to seek ownership of Olmsted Air Force Base and operate it as a commercial airport.

The initial transfer effort was begun early in 1965 and involved long and complicated negotiations with several different departments and agencies of the federal and state governments, the airlines servicing Harrisburg, the Harrisburg Chamber of Commerce, and congressional representatives.

Successful conclusion of the campaign came on July 1, 1967 when Governor Raymond P. Shafer accepted the deed to the airport from the federal government and Olmsted State Airport was born.

During the intervening period another international event had a bearing on the mission of the 168th Military Airlift Group — the entrance of U.S. combat forces into the Vietnam War.

Congress was never too happy with the Secretary of Defense's plan to inactivate Air National Guard units.

When the ANG C-121 and C-97 were called into service for airlifting supplies to U.S. forces in Southeast Asia, remedial legislation was soon enacted.

Beginning in fiscal year 1966, Congress mandated in the Appropriation Act that the Air Force maintain 25 airlift squadrons.

This legislation continued for two more years.

By 1966 the Air Force was making progress in developing its plan for the Coronet Solo psychological warfare capability.

The Air Force operated RC-121 for use as early warning and control purposes and the Navy-modified C-121 was being used to broadcast to American forces in Vietnam.

Therefore attention was actively given to the C-121 for use as a psychological warfare airborne platform.

In 1967 the 168th MAG was very high on the operational capability list and the National Guard Bureau volunteered this unit for the new Coronet Solo mission.

the cost of modifying four C-121s to the electronic warfare mission was \$8 million, and the approval for this program change was held in abeyance by the Defense Department although the concept was widely accepted.

The last episode in this long chain of events took place in June 1967 at the outbreak of the Israel-Arab War.

With the need for a psychological warfare and intelligence monitoring capability, the Deputy Secretary of Defense contacted the Air Force and requested the status of Coronet Solo.

The reply was that the program change request "is on your desk for approval."

It was soon forthcoming, and in the summer of 1967 the last wheels began to turn.

17 Sep 1967: The 193rd TEWS and its parent 193rd TEWG were extended federal recognition at Olmsted State Airport (later renamed Harrisburg IAP) as TAC-gained units and took over the C-121Cs of the 140th MAS, 168th MAG.

Olmsted Air Force Base had become Olmsted State Airport . . . four C-121s were scheduled for modification to EC-121 configuration by Lockheed Aircraft Company, and plans were made for training of ground and aircrew personnel on the new equipment. The blue and white Super Constellations became a reality.

During the summer of 1968, it received its first five modified EC-121s aircraft configured as flying radio and television stations to perform the "Combat Solo" mission.

USAF Unit Histories
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Sources
Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.