

PART I The UN's First "Air Force"*

The peacekeeping operation in the Congo, from 1960 to 1964, was the UN's baptism by fire in nasty internal (intrastate) conflicts. The United Nations had to deal with coups d'état, secessionist provinces, tribal wars, ethnic massacres, and very real threats to its own personnel, including from air attacks. Notably, a lone fighter jet flown by a mercenary pilot against the nascent mission was able to paralyze UN efforts and embarrass the international community. The United Nations was obliged to participate in an aerial arms race with the secessionist Katangan province in order both to protect itself and prevent the breakup of the newborn country. Aerial reconnaissance, provided by Swedish jets, was essential to predict and pre-empt Katangan attacks on UN forces. Bombers provided by India were able to destroy airfields used by the mercenaries. In Operation Grand Slam of December 1962/January 1963, close air support from Swedish jets assisted ground forces to assert the UN's freedom of movement and to capture key airfields and centres in Katanga, finally winning both the war and the peace. But the air effort began much earlier, starting in July 1960 when the United Nations had to bring over 20,000 troops into the vast Congolese territory, requiring a powerful airlift capacity, originally provided by the US Air Force. Soon over a dozen nations contributed. Thus, the mission made use of all three main elements of air power – that is, transport, surveillance, and combat. For this reason, UN personnel rightly boasted that they created the UN's first "air force", despite the use of aircraft for transport and surveillance in previous UN missions.

The mission was in many ways a precursor of the robust multidimensional missions of the twenty-first century. While the UN's experience in the Congo was an overall success, it came at a great cost in human lives and in funds. Over 200 peacekeepers died in the mission; and the financial cost of the mission taxed the resources of the international community, almost driving the United Nations into bankruptcy. For several reasons, it was the first and only UN peacekeeping initiative in Africa until the end of the Cold War in 1988–1989. It continues to provide rich lessons for modern-day peacekeeping as the world deals with many complex conflicts, especially in Africa and in the Congo again.

Fortunately, one of the senior participants in the Congo mission was able to describe his experiences in setting up the UN's first "air force". Then, Group Captain (later Lieutenant General) William K. Carr from Canada oversaw the aircraft and crew from a host of nations around the world working together to achieve a challenging goal. In Chapter 1, William K. Carr shows how the United Nations used practical improvisation and creativity born of necessity to keep the force moving and equipped, even before it acquired its combat capability, as it had never before attempted to create and move such a large force. In 1961, after the deaths of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld, the United Nations adopted a much more robust stance. Combat was authorized not only for self-defence but also

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for the broader defence of the mission, which now included preventing the secession of the mineral-rich Katanga province. Chapter 2, by A. Walter Dorn, describes the challenges of “fighting for peace”. Mission leaders took a defensive posture until the opportune moment when they used combined air and ground power to nullify the military arm of the secessionist government. This showed that combat could be successful in bringing about Katangan peace in a unified country. However, the operations raised many dilemmas. The contributing nation’s (in)decision to support the air mission is typical of peacekeeping, as showcased in Chapter 3 by Kevin Spooner, an expert on the operation. For example, how did Canada maintain national support for the beleaguered mission, even when tough or impossible UN requests were made? More generally, how were considerations of Cold War politics balanced? When to support the use of force? The chapters in Part I help answer these important questions using the fascinating case of the Congo in the first half of the 1960s.