

63rd MILITARY AIRLIFT WING - HISTORY

(In tribute to our fellow Aircrews & Support Organizations of the 63 MAW, Norton AFB, CA)



First established as the 63rd Troop Carrier Wing, Medium (TCW), on 10 May 1949, the 63rd activated as an Air Force Reserve component on 27 Jun 1949 at Floyd Bennett Naval Air Station, New York. Flying T-6, T-7, T-11, and C-47 aircraft, the 63 TCE Medium responded to a federal call to active duty in the early days of the Korean War, from 1 May to 9 May 1951, at which time the unit inactivated.

On 18 Dec 1952, HQ Air Force re-designated the 63rd as the 63 TCW Heavy. The unit began its current tour of service when the Air Staff activated it on 8 Jan 1953. This time, the Altus Municipal Airport (later Altus AFB) served as the home for the 63rd until the unit moved to Donaldson AFB, SC on 15 Oct 1953.

During its nearly 10-year stay at the SC installation, the wing flew primarily C-119, C-124, H-19, and H-21 aircraft. While stationed at Donaldson AFB, the 63 TCW Heavy trained, transported personnel and supplies, and participated in exercises and maneuvers with US Army airborne troops. During the first six months of 1955, the wing airlifted 12,231 tons of equipment and 1,296 passengers on 932 sorties in support of OPERATION Ice Cube - the airlift of supplies and equipment for the distant early warning line construction in Canada. The wing received the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award (AFOUA) for the successful transportation of the equipment during severe weather and without adequate navigational equipment from bases in Canada to points north of the Arctic Circle.

In the following years, the 63rd's special humanitarian airlift role continued to increase. This included an airlift by the 14th Troop Carrier Squadron (TCS) in March 1956 of 21 iron lungs from Boston, MA to polio stricken Argentina. Thirteen months later, a crew from the 15 TCS transported US Ambassador C. E. Bohlen and his family from Moscow, Russia to Rhein Main AFB, Germany (enroute to his new assignment as US Ambassador to the Philippines. Thus, the 15th became the first to land a C-124 "Globemaster" in the Soviet capital.

From 16 Jul to 14 Oct 1960, the 63rd supported the UN OPERATION NEW TAPE in the Congo. This effort involved flying 4,442 safe flying hours while transporting over 800 refugees to Europe, and more than 560 troops and 600,000 pounds of food, supplies, and equipment to various sites in Africa and Europe. Aircrews literally slept in their aircraft and constantly provided assistance throughout the operation. As a result, the wing earned another AFOUA. Upon the closure of Donaldson AFB on 1 Apr 1963, the 63 TCW Heavy moved to its new home at Hunter AFB, GA.

By this time, the wing flew only the C-124 aircraft. Although the wing relocated, its mission was unchanged. In Nov 1964, the 63rd flew 15 missions behind the Iron Curtain and provided relief in the flooded areas of Yugoslavia during an outbreak of hepatitis.

During that same month, 15 of the wing's C-124s supported Belgian C-130 paratroop operations to free hostages held by rebel forces in Belgium. The paratroop's efforts proved successful with the liberation of the hostages. After a military siege of the elected government in the Dominican Republic, the wing supported OPERATION RED FOX / POWER PACK (29 Apr to 8 May 1965), by providing 23 aircraft and 28 aircrews in the movement of an airborne military force to the Caribbean island.

Higher Air Force HQ **redesignated the wing** as the 63rd Military Airlift Wing (MAW) on **8 Jan 1966**. Less than six months later, on 1 Jul, the wing sent a small provisional element to Norton AFB, CA to begin the wing's eventual move to the San Bernardino, California airfield.

On 1 Apr 1967, HQ Military Airlift Command (MAC) discontinued the provisional unit, and officially transferred the 63rd MAW to its new home. This move also marked the wing's transition from the C-124 to the new C-141 "Starlifter" aircraft. Less than a week after arriving at Norton AFB, the first C-141 took off on its initial cargo airlift mission to Vietnam. During the Vietnam War, the wing flew around-the-clock missions in support of the US and allied forces engaged in Southeast Asia.

Within the next few years, the 63rd MAW expanded its mission by providing airlift support for the astronauts assigned to the NASA Apollo program.

On 22 Jul 1969, an aircrew from the 14th MAS flew to Hickam AFB, HI and transported the crew of the history-making Apollo 11 flight (the first men to walk on the moon) in the Mobile Quarantine Facility to Ellington AFB, TX. The wing continued to play a vital role in future NASA programs by providing transportation for personnel, biological samples, and equipment.

Another 63rd MAW first took place on 12 Feb 1973, when a C-141 flown by a crew from the 15 MAS landed at Gia Lam Airport, Hanoi, North Vietnam, and picked up the first contingent of American prisoners of war. The wing eventually transported 387 POWs on 20 flights to Clark AFB, Philippines during OPERATION HOMECOMING (12 Feb to 27 Mar 1973).

In the following three days, the wing provided assistance in OPERATION COUNTDOWN - the withdrawal of 5,000 US troops from Vietnam. When Vietnamese refugees began leaving their homeland, the 63rd again provided the necessary airlift support for OPERATION NEW LIFE. The first C-141 load of refugees arrived at Norton AFB on 27 Apr 1975.

Throughout the last half of the 1970s, the 63rd MAW continued to provide assistance in a variety of humanitarian relief efforts. These missions included support in the aftermath of the 1976 Guatemalan earthquake; quick response to typhoon victims in Guam in both 1976 and 1977; and the 1978 blizzard that left the northeast US virtually crippled. Man-made disasters also required help from the 63rd. ON 21 Nov 1978, two C-141s and their 14 MAS aircrews retrieved over 900 corpses from the Jonestown massacre in Guyana. And, as a result of the Three Mile Island Nuclear Plant partial meltdown in Apr 1979, the 63rd flew two missions that provided approx. 100,000 pounds of charcoal filters needed in the cleanup.

Capt. Kathy LaSauce-Arlington became the first female pilot in Air Force history to command a C-141 when she received her certification by the 63rd MAW's Review and Certification Board on 8 Jan 1980.

The wing logged three more firsts when it received its first C-141B aircraft on 19 Jul 1980, and on 22 Jun 1981 when the wing accomplished the first-ever C-141B air-refueling mission on a flight that delivered fresh produce, mail, and other supplies to the South Pole and McMurdo Sound, Antarctica. Almost a year later on 21 Jun 1982, a 63rd MAW C-141B received fuel from the new KC-10 aerial tanker, in total darkness and on a similar South Pole mission.

Throughout the 1980s, the 63rd MAW continually responded to both military and humanitarian needs. The wing launched 14 C-141Bs in response to OPERATION URGENT FURY - the US invasion of Grenada in 1983 - where they flew troops and equipment from Pope AFB, NC to the Caribbean island.

Two years later, on 21 Sep 1985, the wing flew respiration equipment and lights to Mexico City to help in the recovery efforts following a massive earthquake. In Nov and Dec 1985, the 15 MAS flew members of the Joint Casualty Recovery Center and some heavy earth-moving equipment to Hanoi to assist in the recovery of the remains of seven US MIAs.

And on the home front, the 63rd flew supplies to cattle ranchers in the SE US during OPERATION HAYRIDE in Jul 1986. Two military operations in the late 1980s reflected the quick response capabilities of the 63rd MAW. In 1988 the wing supported Exercise Golden Pheasant - an emergency deployment of US Army troops to Honduras to show US support to the democratic government of that nation.

Then, on 20 Dec 1989, aircrews and aircraft from the 63rd MAW participated in the initial airdrop of troops in the assault on Panama's Torrijos Int'l Airport.. During the three week contingency, the 63rd MAW accounted for 72 of the 147 missions flown by aircraft under the 22nd Air Force during OPERATION JUST CAUSE. Wing operations continued to provide professional assistance into the 1990s.

In what proved to be the largest movement of troops, supplies, and equipment since WWII, OPERATION DESERT SHIELD quickly engulfed the entire 63rd MAW family. During the Aug 1990 to Jan 1991 period, the wing flew 1,916 missions, and transported nearly 21,000 military personnel and 13,651 tons of equipment to the Persian Gulf region. For its efforts in both OPERATION DESERT SHIELD and OPERATION DESERT STORM, the wing received its latest AFOUA for the period 1 Jan 1990 to 30 Apr 1991.

The 63rd MAW was redesignated as the 63rd Airlift Wing on 1 Jan 1992 under USAF Air Mobility Command (AMC), and remained at Norton AFB, CA. Humanitarian efforts seemed endless in 1992. The 63rd AW provided assistance throughout the world that included relief help to the Kurds in Northern Iraq, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) - the former Soviet Union, and war-torn Yugoslavia. Additionally, the 63rd took part in the efforts to transport food and supplies to hurricane-ravaged southern Florida, Hawaii, and Guam.

The May 1992 riots in Los Angeles, CA also required the aid of the 63rd AW, with transport of riot personnel and equipment from various locations into Norton AFB. The 63rd Transportation Squadron (TRNS) then provided ground transportation into the Los Angeles area for these assets. And even though the wing operated only two C-141 squadrons during this period, it still managed to take an active role in the support of relief efforts to famine-stricken Somalia as part of OPERATION PROVIDE HOPE.

During the first months of 1992, the 63rd AW began focusing on the upcoming Mar 1994 unit inactivation and closure of Norton AFB under the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) plan, while still maintaining an active airlift capability.

On 1 Jul 1993, HQ Air Mobility Command redesignated the wing as HQ 63rd AW. That day also marked the first time since its original activation that the wing did not own any aircraft.

The **final C-141Bs transferred to the 445 AW (USAF Reserves) on 30 Jun 1993**. With the departure of its aircraft, the wing turned its full attention on the preservation and transfer of facilities and equipment to other DOD locations and to the local civilian authorities in preparation for the inactivation of the wing and closure of Norton AFB.

HQ 63rd AW and its remaining subordinate units inactivated on 31 Mar 1994 in conjunction with the transfer of Norton AFB to the local office of the USAF Base Conversion Agency. Throughout its history, the wing effectively fulfilled the true meaning behind its motto: Anything, Anywhere, Anytime.

NORTON C-141B MILITARY AIRLIFT SQUADRONS just prior to Closing:

14th Military Airlift Squadron

15th Military Airlift Squadron

52nd Military Airlift Squadron

53rd Military Airlift Squadron

NORTON C-141B 445 MILITARY AIRLIFT WING (ASSOCIATE) SQUADRONS just prior to Realignment:

728th Military Airlift Squadron

729th Military Airlift Squadron

730th Military Airlift Squadron

68th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron

For more information, contact: Norton Air Force Base Museum, San Bernadino, California.

Website: <http://www.nafbmuseum.org/>