

The Instant Air Force

The Creation of the CIA's Air Unit in the Congo, 1962

by

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One of the CIA air unit's T-6 aircraft in flight over central Congo. (Photo: Bengt Landervik)

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1. PREFACE

In 1966, the *New York Times* published an article where it claimed that the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) had put an "instant air force" into the Congo a couple of years previously, to support the operations of mercenary troops hired by the Congolese Government to fight a rebellion.¹ By this time the USA was openly supporting the Congolese Government militarily, politically and economically and it was fairly common knowledge that the CIA was involved in various ways.

What was not common knowledge at the time was that the US para-military² support to the Congolese had actually started long before the rebellion broke out in 1964, and that it was initially intended for entirely different purposes. The CIA had in fact sent an air unit to the Congo in 1962 already, to help support the Congolese Government against a rather modest military threat which had turned into a very serious political threat for the Prime Minister of that period, Cyrille Adoula.

The pages that follow will look into these events in some detail and will also attempt to answer why they took place. But first, to help make sense of the situation in 1962, it is helpful to get some background to what was happening in the Congo.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1. Congo the Colony

In 1908, Belgium officially took over the control of the so called Congo Free State, which until then had been more or less the personal possession of the Belgian King Leopold II. Belgium thereby became the last European country to become the owner of a major colony, and the only one to do so without having any real ambitions of establishing an overseas empire. The Belgians did not see their possession of the Congo as a permanent state of affairs, but rather as holding the land in trust for the Congolese themselves. "Belgium's mission in the Congo is essentially a civilising one," is how the Colonial Charter put it.³ Once the Congolese had evolved to a "civilized" level, Belgium would hand over the territory, but that day was expected to be far in the future.

Neither on the Belgian nor on the Congolese side was there any serious talk about independence in the early post-World War II years. Consequently, the Congo still lacked a nationalist movement in the mid 1950s. There were several major reasons for this, including the lack of an educated elite, the ban on political parties and the lack of information about the situation abroad.

The first political parties were formed in 1958, partly inspired by events in the French Congo, and in early 1959 there were some riots in the Congolese capital Leopoldville. The Belgians got very nervous after this, fearing a colonial war like that of the French in Algeria, and the events in the

¹ *New York Times*, 26 Apr 1966.

² A definition of "para-military" can be found in section 5.3.

³ Quote from Lumumba (1962) p.11. The text of this and the following paragraphs is otherwise based on several sources: see footnote at the end of the section.

Congo snowballed in the year that followed. At a political conference between the Belgians and the Congolese in early 1960, the Congolese delegation demanded immediate independence. The Belgians did not think the Congolese were ready for this. Nevertheless, bowing to the inevitable, they agreed, gambling that they could retain sufficient influence behind the scenes and that a proper transfer of know-how could be achieved after the official hand-over of power.



A typical mission school in the Belgian Congo in 1953. Basic literacy rates were high but very few Congolese were permitted to continue to higher education, since the Belgians wanted to elevate the whole population at the same rate. This lack of an elite was one of the major reasons behind the Congo Crisis. (Photo: author's collection)

The Congolese were as yet totally unaware of one potential time-bomb, namely that the previously so healthy Congolese economy had slowly been deteriorating for a number of years. From all accounts none of the new leaders showed much interest in the finances of the colony, and even if they did, they had very little understanding of how things worked. For example, the man who was to become the first Finance Minister, when a US diplomat asked him how he was going to balance his budget, replied: “Well, there is no problem: we have the machine to print the money now.”⁴ Indeed, the horizons of most Congolese politicians at this time were very narrow and many had never been outside their own province. A Kenyan writer was to comment that, “no colonial power in history was destroyed more quickly, nor by such a rabble.”⁵

Hurried general elections were held in the Congo in the spring of 1960 and no less than 23 parties gained seats in the parliament. The biggest party was Patrice Lumumba's MNC-L with about

⁴ Quote from interview with Devlin.

⁵ Quote from Okumu (1963) p.94.

24 % of the seats, while Joseph Kasa-Vubu's ABAKO party got 9 %. The political power was therefore extremely diluted among many players and getting an agreement on anything was difficult from the very beginning. In the end it was agreed that Lumumba would be Prime Minister and head of the government while Kasa-Vubu became President and head of state.

On 30 June 1960 the new Republic of the Congo came into being.⁶

2.2. Independence

Now that independence had come at last, people expected the politicians to immediately live up to their often very extravagant election promises. The understanding of exactly what independence meant was still extremely vague to most Congolese, except that everything would immediately be much better. But a few days passed and still the average Congolese found his lot unchanged.

It must be noted that the 13 million or so Congolese were still totally dependent on foreigners. On the eve of independence, there were still 110,000 whites in the Congo and these controlled 80 per cent of the private business. They also held virtually all positions in the colonial administration of any importance. This included all officers of the colonial army.

The latter fact was to provide the igniting spark for the Congo Crisis. Just a few days after independence, a mutiny was started by groups of soldiers who were disappointed over the lack of instant promotions and salary improvements. The mutiny quickly spread all over the country, the Belgian officers were dismissed, and chaos set in. The Belgian civilians, who were scared by exaggerated of murder and rape by the soldiers, fled the country in their thousands and as a result both the administration and economy quickly ground to a halt.

In the middle of all this, in July 1960, the province of Katanga in south-eastern Congo declared its independence. Katanga was the richest province, with a large mining industry owned primarily by the Belgians, and stood for some 50 % of the revenue of the Congolese state. The new Republic of Katanga quickly received strong but unofficial support from Belgium.

Over the next two or three months, the Congo Crisis built into a major international crisis. There were many events and stages, too numerous and complex to recount in any detail here. In brief, what happened was that the Belgian Government sent in troops to safeguard its nationals and to restore order. This was done without formal Congolese permission. The Congolese Government turned to the United Nations for assistance and the UN quickly despatched a large peace-keeping force to the country together with major civilian assistance. Unfortunately, in the months to come, it was to become apparent that the mandate of the UN force was not quite as clear as it first appeared. The immediate objective was to replace the Belgian troops with UN troops and this was quickly achieved.

⁶ Other than for the direct quotes noted above, this text is based on Lemarchand (1964), Merriam (1961) and Young (1965).

But then the Congolese Government wanted the UN to crush the Katangese secession and this was something the UN was not prepared to do at this point.

During the early autumn of 1960 the situation threatened to spread into a Cold War conflict, when the Soviet Union began giving some support to the Congolese Government, mainly at the request of Prime Minister Lumumba (see Chapter 4). There was also increasing internal political dissension in the Congo and in the end the Chief of Staff of the army, the *Armée Nationale Congolaise* (ANC), “neutralized” the president and the prime minister and dismissed parliament, and introduced a temporary government. As the months passed it became clear that the Lumumba faction was losing influence in the capital and in the end of 1960 his followers set up a rival government in the city of Stanleyville, in north-eastern Congo. Lumumba himself also tried to flee to Stanleyville but was captured and eventually murdered in early 1961.

Here the situation stood for some time. The economy was in tatters and there was a deadlock in the political situation. President Kasa-Vubu regained his powers in early 1961 but there was no effective government and no functioning parliament. The relations between the Congolese authorities and the United Nations were also poor at times and the international support for the UN’s Congo operation was no longer as universal as it had been initially. The Soviet bloc in particular, plus various “progressive” countries in Africa and elsewhere, were critical of the UN’s failure to take action against Katanga.⁷

2.3. The Adoula Government

In August 1961 it finally proved possible to reconvene parliament and elect a new government, led by Cyril Adoula. He was a compromise candidate, acceptable to all parties, but to please everyone he was forced to form a huge government, with 42 ministers and secretaries of state. This led to a total lack of cohesion and Adoula was never to become a strong Prime Minister.

Able and honest, but weak, Adoula suffered from being an American protégé and had constantly to make concessions to the Lumumbists in order to avoid the accusation of being “sold to the West”. His various ministries were in consequence a succession of coalitions, chosen less for ability than the need to placate parliament by including representatives from every party. The majority were quite incompetent and were more concerned with feathering their own nests than running their departments efficiently.⁸

With the parliamentary crisis solved for the moment, the Congolese Government turned to the Katangan problem. Katanga had meanwhile formed its own military forces and had hired mercenaries from Belgium and elsewhere to provide leadership and technical know-how. Under Congolese pressure, the UN moved to arrest the mercenaries in Katanga in August 1961 but did not manage to sweep up all of them. The following month fighting broke out between UN and Katangese troops

⁷ This text is largely based on Kalb (1982), Lemarchand (1964) and Young (1965).

⁸ Quote from Martelli (1966) p.214. The text of the preceding and following paragraphs is otherwise largely based on several sources: see footnote at the end of the section.

but the results were inconclusive. A second round of fighting followed in December 1961 but again without any decisive outcome.



Congolese Prime Minister Adoula (far right) in discussion with UN Secretary-General Hammarskjöld in 1961. (Photo: UN)

During the first half of 1962 Adoula did his best to get the Congo back on its feet but the constant political infighting and widespread corruption made this very hard. Without the income from the Katangan mines the state finances were in very poor shape and the economy continued to decline, with high unemployment and increasing poverty in most parts of the country. By this time the Soviet Union had lost all its influence in the Congo while the position of the USA was increasingly strong.

A variety of attempts were made to solve the Katangan problem through diplomatic means but these all failed or dragged out with little concrete result. In August 1962, the UN proposed a plan of National Reconciliation which was approved by both the Central Government and Katanga. As usual, the Katangese dragged their feet when it came to implementing the plan, hoping to cause delays until early 1963, expecting the UN to encounter problems in funding its operations in the Congo, possibly leading to a complete UN withdrawal. This time, however, the UN threatened to impose various sanctions unless the Katangans actually showed some progress in its reintegration efforts.

Meanwhile, the Adoula Government was becoming impatient with the lack of progress and found it increasingly difficult to fend off its political enemies who demanded more drastic measures. Politicians in some other provinces also saw the continuing Katanga secession as an encouragement for them, too, to question the validity of the Central Government. By September 1962 Adoula was therefore more and more inclined to solve the Katanga problem by force.⁹

A major problem for the Congolese Central Government was that it lacked air power. During colonial days, the Belgians had operated a small force of transport aircraft and helicopters in the Congo but most of these, plus their Belgian pilots, had been transferred to Katanga soon after independence. The Congolese made a few efforts to build up an air force but none of these led anywhere and by the autumn of 1962 there was not a single pilot, Congolese or otherwise, in the Congolese Air Force (or FAC, for *Force Aérienne Congolaise*). The FAC had, however, bought six ex-Belgian T-6 trainer aircraft in mid 1962 and these could potentially be used for air support missions, if pilots and armament could be found for them.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the Katangese Air Force (the *Aviation Katangaise*, abbreviated Avikat) was being built up again, after having been destroyed by the United Nations during fighting in 1961. By late September the Avikat had ten T-6 aircraft, the same type as that bought by the FAC, but unlike the FAC the Avikat had mercenary pilots for its aircraft and also armament. They soon began flying some ground attack missions in northern Katanga, in support of the Katangan military operations against dissidents and the supporters of the Central Government. Even though the Avikat was quite weak by European standards, it was still strong enough to make the United Nations nervous as well.¹¹

Since it was very much in the interest of the Congolese Central Government to be able to provide its ground troops with effective air support, it needed to find more aircraft or at least some pilots, and needed to do so quickly.

⁹ Other than for the direct quote noted above, this text is largely based on Kalb (1982), Lemarchand (1964) and Young (1965).

¹⁰ NA, FO371/167290, "Air Attaché Leopoldville Annual Despatch for 12 Months Ending January, 1963," 31 Jan 1963; Sonck (1998), part 1.

¹¹ See e.g. UN, DAG-13/1.6.5.2.0:42, "Katangese Aerial Build-up 1960-1962," Mil Info to Force Commander, 26 Sep 1962; Letter UN to Swedish Government, 2 Oct 1962 (copy with author).

3. INTRODUCTION TO THE PAPER

3.1. Purpose and Questions

As mentioned in section 3.3 below, much has already been written about the Congo Crisis¹², about US foreign policy in the 1960s and about the CIA in the same period. Usually the events in 1960 and 1961 are given most attention while the later part of the Katanga secession (other than the actual fighting) is often given less coverage. I have chosen to concentrate on part of this latter time period, more specifically September to December 1962, mainly because it marks the beginning of what would prove to be the most extensive CIA para-military operation in Africa in the 1960s.

The overall purpose of this paper is to look into the background to the US decision to provide air support to the Congo in 1962 and to see how this decision fitted into the overall situation in the Congo at that time.

To be more specific, the investigation will aim at answering the following questions:

1. Why was there a requirement for combat aircraft in the Congo in late 1962?
2. How did the USA get involved in what may at first glance appear to be a purely internal Congolese concern?
3. Which different options did the USA have in providing the Congolese Government with the required air support?
4. Why was it decided to order the CIA to set up an air unit in the Congo? How did the CIA go about doing this?
5. Was the unit used as intended?

Some of the answers to these questions will prove to be fairly straightforward while others are more complex and will be answered in instalments at various points in the paper. A summary of the findings will be found in Chapter 7.

3.2. Theory

Due to the nature of the subject matter, and the way I have elected to approach it, this paper is more empirical than theoretical in its execution and places emphasis on the details of the actual events above how they fitted into a wider context.

However, some of the questions posed above touch on the decision making process in the US Government at the time and it is therefore useful to attempt to draw some general conclusions on

¹² The term "Congo Crisis" is generally used to describe the period of political, social and economical unrest in the Congo that began in July 1960. There is less agreement on the end date of the crisis, many historians using the name to designate the period up to the end of the Katangese secession in January 1963, while others see Mobutu's military coup in November 1965 or the termination of the mercenary revolt in December 1967 as the end date. For the purposes of this paper, this disagreement is of little importance.

this subject from the events being covered. One of the more prominent writers on the Congo, Stephen Weissman, states that the way President Kennedy made decisions “had important consequences for American policy.” Weissman argues that Kennedy was prone to compromising and that he was often overly cautious.

The extremism of Kennedy’s caution was responsible for some of the tottering, the ambiguity, and the blind alleys of American diplomacy. [...] Too often Kennedy’s compromises left the ends confused or untouched and the means confused or inadequate. [...] Uncertainty in both means and ends produced impotence. Power descended to low-level officials whose objectives were much clearer than their responsibility.¹³

Without going too deeply into Weissman’s argument, and all its implications and ramifications, an attempt will be made to evaluate whether the events covered here would seem to verify or contradict Weissman’s interpretation.

3.3. Existing Research and Literature

This paper touches on the history of three main subject areas: the Congo, US foreign policy and the CIA. Much has been written on all three of these areas, even if by no means all of this material has any immediate relevancy to the investigation at hand.

The Congo Crisis of the 1960s has generated a very large body of writing, of the most varied kinds and of varied quality. Interestingly, many of the standard works on the subject were written in the 1960s already and in the last 20 years there has been very little of substance added. Many writers have concentrated on the political aspects of the United Nations operations in the Congo and most of those works are not particularly relevant to this paper. Among the many general works on the Congo Crisis, however, several have been used as sources for the background chapter and references to them can be found in the footnotes there.

Concerning US foreign policy, the standard work is Weissman’s *American Foreign Policy in the Congo 1960–1964*.¹⁴ His sources were largely articles, books and above all interviews with policy makers and others involved on the American and Congolese sides. Since he did not have access to any official files, his text is sometimes lacking in detail and is a bit uneven in its coverage, but is still the most complete account published on the subject. Two later books, where the authors had the advantage of access to State Department files and other documents, were Kalb’s *The Congo Cables* and Mahoney’s *JFK: Ordeal in Africa*.¹⁵ Kalb covers the period mid 1960 to the spring of 1963 while Mahoney concentrates on Kennedy’s presidential period January 1961 to November 1963. Kalb makes special reference to the Soviet side of the story as well, based on accounts in Soviet papers and news reports.

¹³ Weissman (1974) p.192.

¹⁴ Weissman (1974).

¹⁵ Kalb (1982) and Mahoney (1983).

The general literature on the CIA is, of course, very extensive. To obtain an overview of the CIA's activities in the 1960s and earlier, Prados' *Presidents' Secret Wars* is useful reading, even though it does not include much about the Congo and virtually nothing directly relevant to the main subject of this study.¹⁶ Two books exist which claim to specifically deal with the CIA and the Congo. The first of these, Tripathy's *U.S. Foreign Policy*, is largely based on newspaper and magazine articles and other secondary sources and is of limited usefulness. The second is Kelly's *America's Tyrant*, which is also largely based on secondary sources and is written in a journalistic style. Both books in fact have more on general US foreign policy and diplomacy than on the actual CIA operations in the Congo and neither includes any mention of the setting up of the CIA air unit in 1962, instead incorrectly indicating that this was done in 1964.¹⁷

Most accounts of the CIA and the Congo concentrate on the CIA's assassination plans of Lumumba and the CIA support for Colonel (later General) Mobutu. The involvement in countering the 1964 rebellions is often also covered. The only work on the CIA known to mention the air operations before 1964 is Robbins' *Air America*, but this does not include any details on why and how the unit was set up. Robbins' book is a popular history of the CIA's air operations worldwide since World War II and Congo only gets about five pages of coverage in all, of which the pre-1964 operations get less than half a page.¹⁸ To date, the only known mention in print of the early part of the history of the CIA air unit in the Congo appeared in a French magazine, in an article on the Congo by a Belgian aviation historian, and in a Swedish book on UN air operations.¹⁹ However, once again there are only a few lines on the subject, without any analysis of the background.

3.4. Sources and Method

Much of the basic research for this paper was not done specifically for the paper but rather as part of more general research into the history of the Congo, and was performed over a number of years. During that period, a large number of archives were searched for information concerning the Congo in the 1960s, a large proportion of the existing literature on the subject was studied and numerous interviews were performed. This has meant that considerable knowledge of the existing sources and their content was available in advance. The sources actually used during the preparation were therefore to a large extent "pre-selected" as being the ones most likely to be of use to answer the particular questions posed above and keeping in mind the exact time period in question. Many other potential sources not specifically cited in this paper were therefore in reality also considered and discarded as being of little or no relevance, or because they duplicated the sources actually used.

¹⁶ Ranelagh (1987) and Prados (1996)

¹⁷ Tripathy (1989) p.71 and Kelly (1993) p.96.

¹⁸ Robbins (1990).

¹⁹ Sonck (2004) p.51 and Hellström (2003) pp.268-269.

Since several of the questions concern political intent, options and actions of the US Government, the actual political files of the period are of course highly relevant as source material. The centralized nature of the US political decision making process mean that copies of many working documents, correspondence and reports are sent to the White House and from there in time find their way into the collections of the presidential library of the president of the period in questions.²⁰ Since Kennedy was president in the 1961-1963 period, much of the important documentation concerning US actions in the Congo can be found at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library in Boston, Massachusetts. From there the contemporary correspondence between the US State Department and the US Embassy in Leopoldville, the Congo, as well as various reports and other documents created in Washington, have been obtained. It has been complemented by some documents made available in print in the *Foreign Relations of the United States* series, published by the US Government.²¹

Another documentary source has been the correspondence between the British Foreign Office and their embassy in the Congo, from the National Archives (formerly Public Record Office) in London. Further documentation has been located at the United Nations archives in New York. A few additional documents of an official character have also been obtained from other archival and private sources, as specified in the respective footnotes.

The method employed in the research of this type of mainly diplomatic documentation has been to identify any and all files of potential interest in the respective archives, working from document lists and research guides where available, followed by a page by page review of the file contents. Copies have been made of all potentially relevant documents, for further study and reference. This work has yielded much interesting information. However, there are some potential pitfalls as well. One problem is that certain information was never put on paper at the time, at least not in the files that have been available for review. In some cases documents have been withheld from review since they are still considered classified. By now the vast majority of documents in the JFK Library concerning the Congo have been declassified but there are still a number of no doubt highly relevant documents which are not yet made public. Experience has shown that documents mentioning the CIA are particularly prone to withholding, even if the contents is innocuous, and it is therefore possible that a disproportionate number of documents relevant to this study have been withheld.

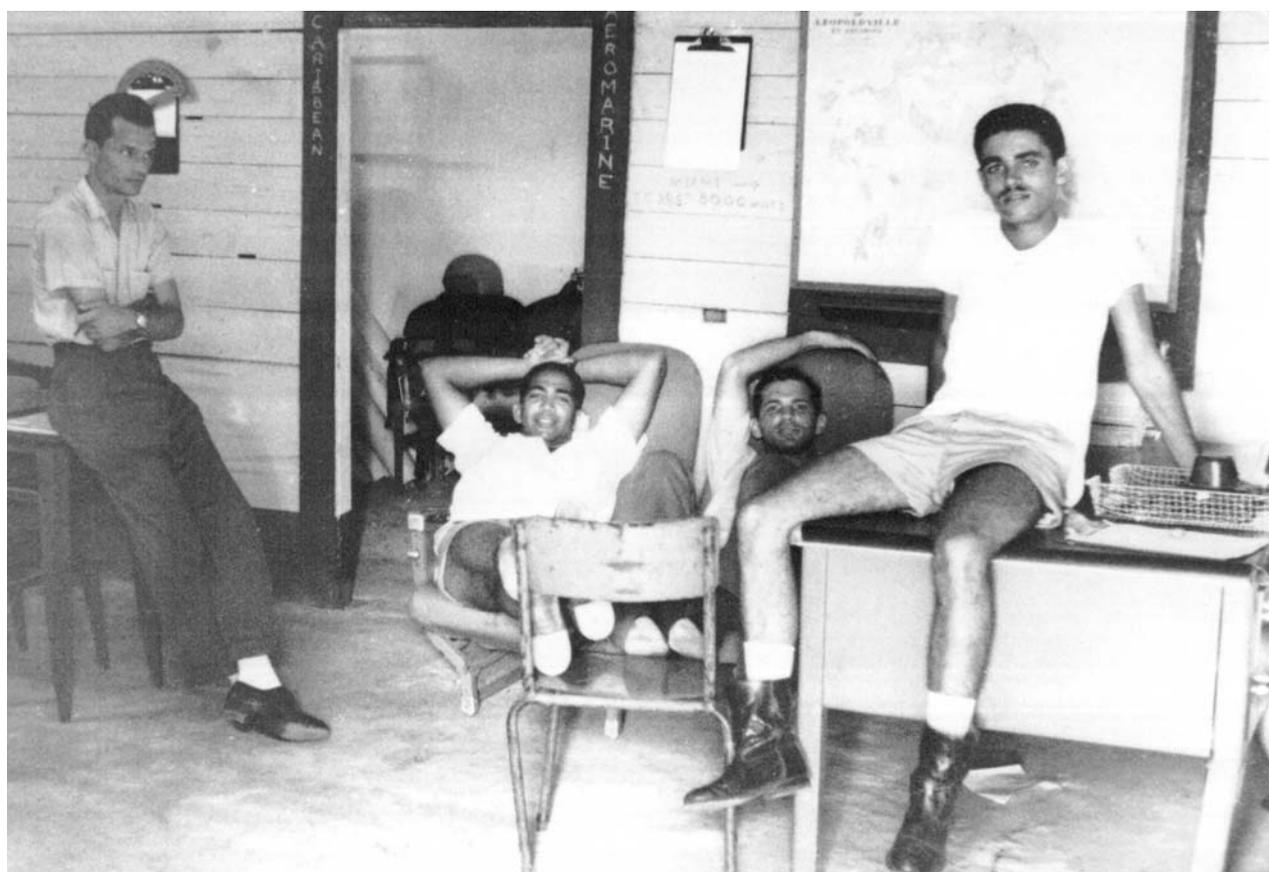
A most important category of documents which has been completely unavailable for research are the relevant operational records of the Central Intelligence Agency, which are nearly all still classified. Since one of the objects of the investigation is to ascertain how the CIA got involved in the air operations in the Congo, this lack of access to CIA files does of course have a potential negative

²⁰ White House files are considered the personal property of each president and are not automatically "public" in the same way as other US government files.

²¹ *FRUS 1958-1960* (1992) and *FRUS 1961-1963* (1994).

impact on the result. Similarly, the records of the “Special Group,” which was the body of the US Government approving all major covert operations,²² have not been available either.

As partial compensation for the lack of documentation on the CIA side, a number of interviews have been conducted with former CIA employees. These have included the CIA Chief of Station²³ in the Congo in 1960-1963, persons involved with the recruiting of air crew in the USA and some of the pilots and mechanics who were in the Congo for the CIA during the 1962-1964 period. Some relevant comments have also been extracted from interviews with United Nations personnel who had contacts with the CIA air unit in the field. The information obtained from the interviews has not been particularly important to understanding the events leading up to the decision to form the CIA air unit, since this part is primarily based on documentary sources. The interviews have, however, been crucial in clarifying the actual events during the setting-up of the air unit as well as the way it was subsequently used.



Some of the Cuban CIA pilots at N'Dolo airfield in Leopoldville, probably in early 1963. Note the company name on the door frame and the text "Miami → TC [True Course] 285° 8000 miles" written on the wall: apparently someone was homesick! (Photo: via Margarita Varela)

Lawrence Devlin, the former CIA Chief of Station, is of course the potentially most knowledgeable interviewee since he had full access to all contemporary information, both on the political side and the CIA side. However, to him the setting up of the CIA air unit was quite unremarkable and

²² A definition of “covert” can be found in section 5.3.

“routine,” and most of the actual work was performed by other people without his direct supervision. He therefore has only limited recollections of the details involved.

Of the first six Cuban pilots in the unit, one (who was replaced fairly quickly) was not very interested in being interviewed and had little of interest to say and three of the others were long dead when research began. Of the remaining two, Rafael García was one of the first being interviewed and at that time I did not have enough knowledge to ask all the right questions. He unfortunately died in an accident before I could make a follow-up interview. After his time in the Congo he wrote a detailed report for the CIA about the air operations there but this has so far been refused for release. The sixth pilot, and the one who provided most of the information concerning the initial period, was Alfredo Maza. Unlike almost all the other ex-CIA Cubans, he does not live in Florida and it has therefore only been possible to interview him once, which necessitated a special trip to his home town. The single mechanic with the first group declined to be interviewed. The remaining Cubans interviewed were in the Congo at a slightly later date, or provided services back home in Florida, and the information relevant to this paper only formed a small part of the respective interview.

Most of the interviews were carried out face to face, with one person at a time. Only in the case of Devlin (who has been interviewed twice) were detailed questions prepared beforehand, but even in his case only the second time and they were not made available to him in advance. Particularly with the Cubans, the interviews have usually taken the form of relaxed talks rather than formal question and answer sessions since this format has proved to work best. The interviews were therefore largely *ad hoc*, with questions being formulated on the basis of the answers being received, even though I always had a number of general subject areas in mind which I would steer the discussion toward. All interviews were taped, except those performed by telephone, and interview notes were subsequently prepared from the tapes. For telephone interviews, notes were made during the interview. The possibility has also existed to make follow-up questions by telephone but this has only been done once or twice.

In most cases I have been introduced to each interviewee by a previous interviewee, which has meant that I have been vouched for as being “OK” and consequently the talks have almost always been open and the answers – as far as I have been able to tell – not deliberately censored for any reason. Strictly speaking, former CIA employees should always get clearance from the CIA before talking about work-related subjects but the Cubans in particular consider the Congo to be an “open secret” and see no reason to keep quiet about their time there. I have only been refused answers to questions on very few occasions, although there has admittedly been a certain amount of “self-censorship,” i.e. in some cases not asking a question which the person was thought unlikely to want

²³ In CIA terminology, the Chief of Station is the local CIA officer responsible for the operations in a particular country. He is usually attached to an embassy.

to answer. However, this has mainly applied to questions of a more personal nature and is not likely to have impacted the results of this paper.

The use of information from interviews is also always fraught with certain other dangers. In this case the interviews were carried out some 35-40 years after the event and there is of course a risk that facts have been forgotten or distorted over time. Wherever possible, the interview results have therefore been double-checked against each other. With a subject such as the one at hand, there is also a risk of deliberate distortion or disinformation, for a variety of reasons. Here it must be noted, however, that not in a single case has any interviewee been found to have told any deliberate lies. Such factual errors as have been detected have more likely been due to poor memory, poor information received at the time or mistaken assumptions based on incomplete information. As is to be expected, certain interviewees have been found to be more reliable and/or well-informed than others. In a few cases, the person being interviewed could also back up parts of his account with various kinds of documents, such as a contemporary pilot's log book recording the details of individual flights.

Since the events described took place in the Congo, and the air unit was formally part of the Congolese Air Force, it would seem reasonable to expect certain Congolese sources as well. Unfortunately, none have been located. From the US documentation, it would appear that only a limited number of high-level Congolese government officials were involved in the discussions in 1962 concerning air support and none of these are known to be alive today, nor have they left any memoirs. Record-keeping was, by all accounts, not a strong point of the Congolese authorities in the 1960s and it is very unlikely that much of relevance has survived in the Congolese archives, or is retrievable if by chance anything does exist. None of the researchers specializing in the Congo in the last 30 years or so, including Congolese historians, have ever made mention of being able to locate any documentation concerning the 1960s in the Congo itself. In my opinion, however, this is not a crucial problem to this particular paper.

The photographs used in the paper are largely from private sources, both among the Cubans and others who were in the Congo in the 1960s, apart from two from the United Nations archives.

3.5. Chapter Organization

Since the subject covered by the paper is very specialized, and one which most readers perhaps have little familiarity with, some introductory chapters have been provided. Chapter 2 thus seeks to explain the political developments in the Congo up to 1962, which were of great importance to the subject at hand. Chapter 4 gives a brief summary of the Cold War aspects up to the same time. The background information which has been included is therefore perhaps rather more extensive than is normal for a paper of this type. Chapters 5 and 6 form the main part of the actual investigation.

4. THE COLD WAR AND THE CONGO

4.1. US and Soviet Policy up to 1960

Up to the late 1950s, the United States had little interest in Africa, which was seen as a European concern. Nor was it much of a NATO concern, since Africa south of the Tropic of Cancer was specifically excluded from NATO's obligations.²⁴ After World War II, the Congo was important to the USA as a source of uranium but new uranium finds elsewhere reduced the US dependence on the Congo in this regard during the 1950s. The general policy of the USA at the end of the 1950s was to support the eventual abolishing of colonialism but she pragmatically tried to find a balance between support for her European friends and encouragement of self-determination for colonial people. In late 1958, the Belgians were assured that "there was no pressure by the United States to turn colonies into independent states until they were ready for their independence."²⁵

The Soviet Union initially also had little interest in Africa. Indeed, as long as Stalin was alive, Soviet policy was actually to oppose de-colonization, since it was felt that power would just be handed over to Western dominated puppet regimes. This changed when Nikita Khrushchev came to power and from 1954, Soviet and Eastern European experts began to be sent out to build up contacts and to obtain first-hand knowledge of the situation. The Belgian Congo became a special Czech responsibility and a Czech consulate was opened there in 1954. At first this was mainly involved in promoting trade but from 1958 the consulate became increasingly involved in political activities, making friends with Congolese politicians and trying to build alliances for the future. Only at the Congolese independence in June 1960 did the Soviet Union finally step out from the shadows and open an embassy of their own in the Congo.²⁶

When the mutiny started in the Congo in July 1960, the Congolese Government initially contacted the US Embassy for assistance but was encouraged to turn to the United Nations instead. From the very start, the USA gave the UN operations in the Congo its full support, even if the actions of individual UN officials were not always approved of. At the same time, the USA ensured that it retained friendly relations with Belgium, which had major interests in its former colony.²⁷

Within a few weeks, Congolese Prime Minister Lumumba was getting increasingly agitated towards the United Nations and in the end turned to the Soviet Union for help. Like the USA, the Soviet Union had committed to supporting the UN operation in the Congo, thereby keeping the Cold War out of the Congo, but despite this the Soviet Government decided to send some assistance directly to the Congolese. The material assistance was actually quite modest (some trucks, a few aircraft – no arms) although several hundred advisors were also dispatched. Even so, the Soviet

²⁴ The North Atlantic Treaty, Article 6, URL (30 Dec 2005) <http://www.nato.int/docu/basic/txt/treaty.htm#FN1>

²⁵ *FRUS, 1958-1960*, Doc. 90, "Memorandum of Conversation", 8 Oct 1958.

²⁶ Hellström (2005), pp.8-9, 14-16 & 20.

²⁷ Weissman (1974), pp.55-63.

action was seen as very provocative in the west, particularly by the USA. This period of Soviet influence ended in mid September, however, when all Eastern European diplomats and other personnel were forced to leave the Congo after the military coup by Colonel Mobutu. This was a serious set-back for the Soviet Union, and particularly for Premier Khrushchev, who had invested a lot of prestige in the Congo. The Soviets continued to provide some support for the “alternative,” pro-Lumumba government set up in the eastern part of the Congo but this was relatively half-hearted.²⁸



Nikita Khrushchev gives Tito a few pointers during the Congo debates in the United Nation in 1960. (Photo: UN)

4.2. The USA and Adoula

The Soviet support for the Lumumba Government in the autumn of 1960 led to an intensified American interest in the Congo. The main US objective was to keep the Soviets out but, as yet, the American themselves had little influence in the Congo. Although various steps were taken through diplomatic channels and the CIA to affect the outcome, it appears that the USA really had only limited direct impact on the political events at this stage.²⁹

²⁸ Kalb (1982) pp.55-70 & 89-92.

²⁹ DDE, Whitman File, NSC Series, Minutes of various NSC Meetings Jul-Dec 1960; Interview Devlin.

The Central Intelligence Agency had a presence in the Congo at this time and was actually involved in a plot to assassinate Patrice Lumumba, although nothing actually came of this and Lumumba was eventually killed in a Belgian-Katangese plot in February 1961.³⁰

The US policy during the Eisenhower administration was largely Cold War oriented and Eisenhower himself continued to have little interest in Africa and Africans. But soon after President John F. Kennedy came to power in January 1961, a new policy was introduced. Its main points were to widen the mandate of the UN in the Congo, in order to ensure that the Congo remained “neutral ground” in the Cold War, and to encourage a broad-based political solution that included all major political parties, even that of Lumumba and his supporters. In the months to come, the United States gradually increased its influence in the Congo and made friends by means both fair and foul but was careful not to be seen to get too involved in the local political scene.³¹

At the parliamentary negotiations for a new government in mid 1961, there was widespread bribery of politicians carried out by the CIA, to ensure that the “leftist” influence was minimized. As for the new Prime Minister, the CIA chief in the Congo thought Adoula was “absolutely the best person who could have come out of that conference. [...] There were other people who would have been better from my point of view but you have to be practical in politics.”³² The Soviet Union also decided to support Adoula but the diplomatic relations between the Soviet Union and the Congo were not immediately restored and in fact the Soviet influence in the Congo between the autumn of 1961 and the autumn of 1962 was virtually zero.

The Kennedy administration continued to channel its support to the Congo through the United Nations, partly to avoid criticism from the Soviet Union but partly also because President Kennedy had respect for the UN. By early 1962, however, the UN was in severe economic trouble due to its costly Congo operations. The main problem was Katanga, which was receiving unofficial support from Belgium and Great Britain, who wanted to protect their own economic interests in the region. The United States, on the other hand, continued to work for a re-integrated Congo. The country was considered a keystone of Africa and the US goal was:

[A] stable society under a stable and progressive government. That government may be “non-aligned” in its international policies. That is for it to decide. But it should be strong enough and determined enough to safeguard its real independence. [...] Equally important, we wish to avoid the creation in Africa of a new Korea or a new Laos.³³

The American fear was that, if the Katanga secession was not settled properly, the Congo would break down into numerous small states based on tribes and always at each other’s throats. “Some

³⁰ De Witte (2001).

³¹ Mahoney (1983).

³² Interview Devlin.

³³ Ball (1961) pp.2-3. This small publication was based on a speech by Under Secretary of State Ball in Dec 1961; the information it contains is matched closely also by State Department documents, meaning that the official Congo policy at the time was also the one followed in practice.

would have been puppet states of the East Germans, others puppet states of the Czechs, the Soviets, the Americans – whatever. And it would have been a disaster.”³⁴

As 1962 continued, the US Government was therefore always supportive of the Adoula Government but at the same time did its best to discourage a full-scale civil war, which would be the result if the Congolese were to launch an attack on Katanga. The USA in mid 1962 still hoped for a diplomatic solution of the Katanga problem, engineered through the United Nations.³⁵

4.3. A Soviet Come-back?

By 1962, Soviet policymakers had decided that socialism in Africa would not come automatically but needed to be carefully guided by internal powers. The only possible group to do this was the national bourgeoisie in each country and support to various guerilla movements in Africa therefore ceased. In the case of the Congo, Soviet commentators were careful not to give any direct criticism of Adoula, instead blaming all disliked policies on “reactionary elements” in the Congolese parliament.³⁶

Its set-backs in the Congo had made the Soviet Government shift its support away from the United Nations operations in the Congo and the Soviet attitude towards the UN was from 1961 instead a very critical one. All the countries in Eastern Europe also refused to pay its share of the cost of the UN Congo operation, almost causing the UN to go bankrupt.

Since the Soviets had from the very beginning maintained that the Katangan secession was an imperialist plot, they kept insisting that the UN take stronger measures against Katanga. With the increasing dissatisfaction of Adoula over the UN’s lack of progress, it was therefore not surprising that the Soviet Union in August 1962 presented its own plan on how to solve the problem. Katanga was to be isolated, the mercenaries expelled and aid given to Central Government. At the same time the Soviet Union appointed an ambassador to the Congo again.³⁷

There was now an increasing risk (from a US perspective) that the Soviet Union would build up its influence in the Congo again. On 9 October the CIA presented a report on the situation which stated that the Soviet Union had offered to provide aircraft and other assistance to the Congo. The report stressed the importance of finding a solution to the Katanga problem and claimed that failure to take immediate steps to find a workable solution “will lead to almost certain failure for American policy in the Congo. [...] The immediate result would be a sharp decrease in American prestige and influence in the UN, in underdeveloped countries in general, and particularly in the Congo.”³⁸

The pressure was now on to do something, and quickly.

³⁴ Interview Devlin.

³⁵ Mahoney (1983).

³⁶ Legvold (1970) pp.341-342 and Morison (1964) p.85.

³⁷ Namikas (2002) p.361-362.

³⁸ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 32, “Prospects for the Congo in the Event of Failure of the UN reconciliation Plan,” CIA, 9 Oct 1962.

5. OPTIONS

If the US Government was to assist the Congolese Government in countering the Katangese air threat, there were a number of possible ways to go about it. The two main alternatives for the Americans were of course to give assistance themselves or to get someone else to provide it.

Getting someone else to do it had the advantage of reducing the risk of accusations against the USA for meddling in the Congo. In theory, the USA could have attempted to persuade one of its allies, or some neutral country in Africa, or elsewhere, to provide the Congolese with unilateral assistance. However, even ignoring all the possible practical and political complications which could have arisen from such a move, it would likely have been very hard to find any country willing to stick its neck out in this way. In practice, this option was not even seriously considered. (There were, however, discussions in 1962 about Italian involvement in the setting up of a military flying school in the Congo, but this was of course a much more long-term project.³⁹) The other possible route was to go through the United Nations, which was already heavily involved in the Congo.

If the US Government decided to go ahead on its own, the obvious solution would be to officially send in US military forces, co-ordinated with the Congolese at a high level. Operationally this had several advantages but politically there were many problems or at least risks. Another possible solution would be to use a force which *de facto* was under US control but not obviously so, and this is where the Central Intelligence Agency came into the picture.

5.1. The United Nations Option

Official US policy concerning the Congo in mid 1962 was still to work through the United Nations whenever possible. Indeed, the US and UN aims in the Congo largely coincided at this time and it was not necessary for the US Government to put much effort into persuading the UN to maintain an offensive air capability in the Congo.⁴⁰

When the United Nations forces arrived in the Congo in July 1960, they also brought with them their own air force. This initially consisted of transport aircraft as well as light aircraft and helicopters for operations in “the bush.” The UN Air Division was providing direct support to the troops in the field and performed most of the transport of UN troops and equipment within the country, since the road network was often very poor. Most of the aircraft were provided by the USA while the crews came from a variety of different countries, particularly from among the non-aligned states. Sweden

³⁹ See e.g. JFK, NSF Congo, Box 32, “US Views on ANC Training Program,” Telegram from Department of State to US Embassy Leopoldville, 25 Oct 1962.

⁴⁰ Mahoney (1983).

was a major contributor of personnel. In addition, the US Air Force provided a lot of transport flight to and from the Congo in support of the UN but only rarely made any flights inside the Congo.⁴¹

There were some discussions about providing the UN forces with attack and reconnaissance aircraft in 1960 already but this was refused by UN Secretary-General Hammarskjöld. The only time the UN had ever used armed aircraft up to date point was in the Korean War in 1950-1953, but that had been a very different type of operation compared to the Congo. There was also no real need for any armed aircraft as long as it just came to keeping the peace in general. The situation changed as Katanga built up its air force, the Avikat, and obtained armed Fouga Magister trainer aircraft in early 1961, but even then the UN decided not to take action. Only when the Fouga began attacking on UN troops and positions during the fighting in September that year, and especially after the death of Hammarskjöld in a mysterious airplane crash soon afterwards, did the UN request Ethiopia, India and Sweden to send a fighter squadron each to the Congo.⁴²

By the time the fighter aircraft arrived the fighting between the UN and Katanga had stopped for the moment but flared up again in December 1961. The UN air force this time carried out a pre-emptive strike against Avikat's main base at Kolwezi and knocked out about half of its aircraft on the ground. The fighting continued for about two weeks but then the situation quietened down again for the first half of 1962.⁴³

When the situation with Katanga began worsening again in the autumn of 1962, the UN Air Division still had its three fighter squadrons in place. But in late October the Ethiopian unit abruptly left the Congo, after one of their aircraft had been lost in an accident. At the same time, India also decided to pull out its unit, which had been continuously decimated due to the border conflict between India and China that had broken out earlier in the year. From early November 1962, the UN fighter force in practice consisted of the four surviving SAAB J 29 fighters of the Swedish F 22 squadron, even if some of the Indian aircraft remained in the Congo for a few more weeks without contributing to the UN operations.⁴⁴

The UN fighter force was thus reduced from its maximum of 13 aircraft in late 1961 to only four in November 1962. Considering that the province of Katanga is the size of Sweden and Denmark combined, the US Air Attaché in Leopoldville was certainly not exaggerating when he described the situation as: "Too much territory – too few UN aircraft." In his opinion, the capability of the UN fighters to destroy the Katangese aircraft in the air was "non-existent" and the ability to do any real damage on the ground was "dubious." The first was due to the problem of finding the Katangese aircraft in the first place, since there was no effective radar coverage in the Congo, while the latter

⁴¹ Hellström (2003) pp.29-38.

⁴² Hellström (2003) pp.48-49.

⁴³ Hellström (2003) pp.49-59.

⁴⁴ Hellström (2003) p.61.

was due to a “lack of full range of armament.”⁴⁵ But while he was correct about the shortage of aircraft and radar, the weapons that F 22 had available were in fact adequate, as had already been shown in the fighting the previous year (and which would later be apparent once again).



Two mercenary flown T-6 aircraft of the Katangese Air Force on a mission in the autumn of 1962. These were the aircraft the Congolese Government and the United Nations were so worried about. (Photo: via Leon Libert)

The shortage of aircraft was, however, only part of the problem, as the UN and the US saw it. There were apparently doubts at the UN headquarters in New York whether the Swedish unit would be effective, or even that it would obey orders if it came to combat. Already in 1961 the Swedish officers had turned down some requests for air support, due to the risk of civilian casualties. This had not been well received by the UN and the Swedish commander had been threatened with dismissal but in the end nothing came of this.⁴⁶ In late November 1962 another incident occurred, when the Swedish squadron commander refused a direct order to shoot down all Katangan aircraft, whether armed or not. There was widespread agreement to this decision among the Swedish air crew and other Swedish UN personnel, and it was subsequently also backed by the Swedish Government, but the refusal was seen as unacceptable by the UN Air Commander (an Indian), who resigned. The incident was also reported on in negative terms by both the US and British air attaches, the American lamenting that the “concerted efforts of UNNY [United Nations HQ in New York] ... can be nullified by the actions of one officer.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 33, Telegram from US Air Attaché Leopoldville to Department of State, 15 Nov 1962.

⁴⁶ Interview Lampell.

⁴⁷ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 33, Telegram from US Air Attaché Leopoldville to Department of State, 28 Nov 1962; NA, FO371/161550, “UN Air Operations,” W/C J.C. Cogill to Air Ministry, London, 28 Nov 1962.

By coincidence, on the very same day that the above incident took place, the Swedish Government approved sending four additional fighters to the Congo, but at the same time reaffirmed its previous stand that the Swedish aircraft could not be used “to force any of the parties in the Congo to accept a certain solution to the Congo’s problems,” nor could they participate in any joint operations with the Congolese army, in effect meaning that they were in the Congo for purely defensive purposes.⁴⁸

This of course meant that the Swedes were largely irrelevant for any possible operations discussed between the US and the Congolese governments and also explains why the UN tried hard to persuade other, presumably more tractable countries to send fighter aircraft to the Congo. In the meantime, the existence of the Swedish fighter unit was in effect disregarded in all US discussions and terms like “the present fighter aircraft vacuum” were used to describe the current situation.⁴⁹

The main advantage to the US Government of working through the United Nations was that any action by the UN was much less likely to incite criticism and accusations of “imperialism” and other ulterior motives than a corresponding action by the USA. This is not to say that the UN operation in the Congo did not have its detractors, far from it, and Secretary-General U Thant had to be careful not to proceed too quickly or too aggressively.

Balanced against the advantage of a reduced political risk was the fact that the US could only exert indirect control over any force under UN command. Although the UN and US agendas were largely similar, this did not mean that the UN was prepared to take its orders from the USA. Indeed, the Secretary-General and his staff are specifically forbidden by the UN charter to “seek or receive instructions from any government.”⁵⁰ There was no guarantee that even if the UN did manage to assemble an adequate air force in the Congo the aircraft would be used exactly in the way the USA would wish them to be used, or at the point in time optimum to the USA. Nor would the actions by the UN give the US Government the same degree of credit and influence with the Congolese as that provided by direct American action.

On balance, however, the UN option had strong appeal and remained an interesting alternative throughout the latter part of 1962.⁵¹

5.2. The US Military Option

In the early 1960s the aviation forces of the USA were likely the most powerful in the world. The US Air Force (USAF) had some 15,500 aircraft, with another 14,000 in the US Navy, Marine Corps and

⁴⁸ Memorandum from Utrikesdepartementet, Stockholm, 23 Nov 1962, copy with author (translation by author).

⁴⁹ NARA, RG 218, Folder 091 Congo, “Operating Plan for the Congo,” undated draft [Dec 1962].

⁵⁰ Charter of the United Nations, Chapter XV, Article 100, URL (22 Nov 2005) <http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/>

⁵¹ Mahoney (1983).

Army, and there were American air bases all around the world.⁵² Finding a few aircraft to send to the Congo could not have posed much of a practical problem.

A mission like that being envisaged in the Congo would have been considered the responsibility of the US Air Force rather than of any of the other branches of the US armed forces. Africa was not important enough to the USA to warrant its own air force command and instead the continent came under the operational command of United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE). After being run down following World War II, the USAFE was built up again from the late 1940s as part of the Cold War rearmament. There were major USAFE bases in many of the European NATO countries and also in North Africa.⁵³

Since the USA had considered Africa a primarily European concern up to the beginning of the Congo Crisis, there was little knowledge of air operations in “black Africa” and no permanent air bases south of the Sahara. This was to prove something of a challenge to the USAF when it was called upon to mount an airlift in support of the UN forces in the Congo beginning in July 1960 but the practical problems were quickly overcome.⁵⁴ Due to the continuing support of the UN, by 1962 the USAF had gained considerable experience in the operation of transport aircraft in Africa and also had good knowledge of the general conditions in the Congo. Of course, the operation of combat aircraft would place somewhat different demands on the local set-up but again the practical problems would not be too difficult to solve. Also, if a country like Sweden – with virtually no experience of overseas operations of combat aircraft – could manage to deploy a unit to the Congo and keep it operational there, no doubt the USA could manage to do so as well.

The USAF had a vast range of different aircraft to choose from, for possible deployment to the Congo. Although there were several types of armed propeller-driven aircraft still in USAF service, it appears that none of these were ever seriously considered for the task at hand. The USAF had in fact recently built up a so-called Air Commando organization, using older type aircraft intended for deployment to third-world countries at short notice, primarily to counter communist insurgency.⁵⁵ In 1962 the Air Commandos were operating in South Vietnam but the one major difference between Vietnam and the Congo was that there was no threat of enemy air action in South Vietnam, as there was from Katanga. There does not appear to have been any actual discussion on this matter and instead it seems to have been taken for granted that jet aircraft would be used, which was also natural since the UN fighter force in the Congo consisted of jets only.

Since there was a strong possibility that Katangese aircraft would have to be attacked on the ground as well as in the air, it was preferable to deploy fighter-bombers rather than dedicated

⁵² Green and Punnett (1963), p.25

⁵³ Steijger (1991).

⁵⁴ USAFE, “The Congo Airlift – 1960,” Historical Division, Office of Information, HQ USAFE, n.d. [1961].

⁵⁵ Haas (1997) p.220ff.

interceptor or ground attack aircraft.⁵⁶ For various practical reasons it was not suitable to send the most modern and sophisticated aircraft to the Congo, nor was it necessary since the Katangan aircraft were not really that much of a threat by USAF standards. The Republic F-84F Thunderstreak and the North American F-100 Super Sabre were the aircraft in USAFE inventory in 1962⁵⁷ which were most likely to be used.

There had in fact been discussions about sending US combat aircraft to the Congo in September 1961 already. When the UN initially experienced problems in obtaining fighter aircraft from other countries to counter the Katangese air attacks against UN troops and aircraft, President Kennedy agreed to send US fighter aircraft to the Congo “only if no fighter aircraft of other nations were made available to the United Nations,” and only for purely defensive purposes.⁵⁸ It is not known if any preparations were made for any actual deployment and, in any case, the question quickly became moot since the UN were soon able to get promises of aircraft from elsewhere.

Even if this is not clearly stated, it seems likely that had any US aircraft been sent to the Congo in 1961 they would have been under UN control. In practice this would presumably have worked much as was the case for the Swedish UN fighter squadron, i.e. that the unit received its orders through the UN chain of command but that it could refuse to carry out any orders which were felt to be contrary to national policy. Here there was a trade-off between political risk and control. The political risk to the Americans for a US unit under UN command was greater than for e.g. a Greek unit under UN command, but it was certainly less than for a US unit under direct US command. On the other hand, the unit would only be able to carry out missions sanctioned in advance by UN headquarters.

A more extreme case would be for the US Government to send a fighter unit to the Congo without UN blessings and without placing it under even nominal UN control. This could of course be done from a practical point of view, provided that the Congolese Government agreed to such a course. The advantage would be that the unit would be able to act with great freedom and in such a way as would most benefit US–Congolese interests. The downside would be a serious risk of diplomatic protests and other fall-out, the extent and seriousness of which could be difficult to predict in advance. At the very least, there would be condemnation from the Soviet Union and its allies, and quite possibly also from several African and other third-world countries wary of neo-colonialism.

In summary, a direct US participation was quite feasible but the negative impact was potentially great. Consequently this was not likely to be a first-choice option but rather something of a last resort.

⁵⁶ Fighter-bombers are dual-purpose aircraft which can be used both for air-to-air and air-to-ground missions while interceptors are intended only for air-to-air combat.

⁵⁷ Steijger (1991).

⁵⁸ *FRUS 1961-1963*, Doc. 120, “National Security Action Memorandum No.97,” 19 Sep 1961.

5.3. The CIA Option

Soon after World War II, the Central Intelligence Agency was created as the main intelligence organization of the USA. Although the CIA was primarily intended to collect, process and distribute intelligence obtained through various means, President Truman soon issued special directives which allowed the CIA to perform other secret duties, including,

propaganda, economic warfare; preventive direct action, including sabotage, anti-sabotage, demolition and evacuation measures; subversion against hostile states, including assistance to underground resistance movements, guerrillas and refugee liberation groups, and support of indigenous anti-communist elements in threatened countries of the free world.⁵⁹

These were very wide areas of operation and could be taken to include virtually any kind of activity, as long as it was in support of the objectives of the President of the USA. This did not mean that the activities had to be in support of the official US policy; indeed, an important part of the original intention was that the CIA could perform operations which were contrary to, or at least not fully in line with the official US policy.

Many of the activities mentioned in the above directive were of a nature which often goes under the collective name “para-military.” Strictly speaking, this term denotes “civilians trained and organized in a military fashion,”⁶⁰ but it is often extended to mean any kind of military-style operation performed by a group that is not an official part of a country’s military forces. This does not mean that the individual members of the para-military group cannot have military training or backgrounds: indeed, they often do.

Two other terms which are often used in connection with intelligence operations are “covert” and “clandestine.” The former is an operation which depends on appearing to be something it is not, for example an agent under cover, who pretends to be somebody else. “A covert operation is visible: No effort is made to hide it from view; the major effort is to disguise it.” A clandestine operation, on the other hand, depends on being completely undetected, as for example when landing saboteurs from a submarine at night. “There is no effort to disguise the operation; it is secret only because it is hidden, but it is exactly what it appears to be.”⁶¹

Using air power to support secret operations was first done during World War II, at least in a more organized manner. Most of the major combatants developed special units intended to spread propaganda, to drop agents and supplies by parachute or even to land and operate behind enemy lines. During the late 1940s the CIA began to build up a capability to perform various kinds of air operations. Early on, a variety of missions were flown in support of anti-communist guerrilla movements in the Ukraine, the Baltic States and elsewhere.⁶²

⁵⁹ National Security directive NSC-10/2 of 18 Jun 1948, quoted in Prados (1996), p.29.

⁶⁰ Definition from *The Free Dictionary*, URL (25 Jul 2005) <http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com>

⁶¹ McCargar (2001), pp.25-26.

⁶² See e.g. Prados (1996), pp.41 & 56.

In addition to the types of secret operations discussed above, the CIA was of course also engaged in the collection of intelligence, which indeed was its main activity. Here, too, did the CIA engage in air operations, not least the U-2 “spy aircraft” used to photograph targets in the Soviet Union until one aircraft was shot down in 1960 and its pilot captured.⁶³

During the 1950s the CIA also became involved in operations where armed aircraft were used. The first of these was Guatemala in 1954, where the CIA organized the overthrow of a socialist government through an invasion by a “Liberation Army” of Guatemalan exiles, backed up by air support designed to create disruption and panic.⁶⁴

This operation was a watershed in many ways. Firstly, and very importantly, it was the first time the CIA employed combat aircraft. Indeed, it was very likely the very first time any government set up a combat capable “air force” outside the control of its regular military forces, and certainly the first time this was done in time of peace. Secondly, it was a covert as opposed to a clandestine air operation, since the “Liberation Air Force” was officially crewed by volunteers rather than persons in employ of the US Government, and used aircraft obtained on the private surplus market. That few people actually believed this was really beside the point: what was important was that nobody could actually prove any direct US involvement. Thirdly, the operation highlighted the practical problems of actually operating a “secret” air force in the field. This was an aspect that was to be improved in the future. Lastly, and most importantly from the CIA’s point of view, the Guatemalan operation showed that the concept of a covert air force did indeed work in practice: it could make a difference and could in fact determine the outcome of a whole campaign.

Two further, major operations using armed aircraft were carried out in Indonesia in 1958 and in connection with the Bay of Pigs invasion on Cuba in 1961. The first was reasonably successful until one of the CIA aircraft was shot down by the Indonesians and the pilot captured, after which the operation was curtailed for political reasons. The Bay of Pigs operation was a major disaster and no less than seven CIA aircraft were shot down, with the loss of twelve lives, including four US instructors who had volunteered for last-minute missions.⁶⁵

By 1962 the CIA had thus gained considerable experience in how to organize, equip and run small air forces in remote areas of the world. One spin-off from the Bay of Pigs operation was that a cadre of Cuban pilots was now available in the USA, already with experience of the CIA’s ways of working. Para-military operations formed an important part of the CIA’s activities at this time and they had a cadre of a couple of hundred people who carried out planning and training for operations. Additional personnel were hired as needed, either on loan from the US military or else from the “free market” in the USA or abroad.⁶⁶

⁶³ See e.g. Ranelagh (1987) pp.311-320.

⁶⁴ Prados (1996) pp.98-107.

⁶⁵ Prados (1996) pp.130-144 & 198-211.

⁶⁶ Marchetti (1974) p.123.

6. THE BIRTH OF THE CIA AIR UNIT

6.1. Evaluating the Congolese Air Force

As part of the US support for the Congo Government, a military advisory team travelled to the Congo in June 1962. Its report was published the following month. Concerning the FAC, the report noted – much like the British and the UN also did around this time – that there were grave problems in many areas and then went on to suggest various improvements. As for the future, it was stated that:

Development of such an organisation will necessitate outside training and material assistance over a period of time. Until the indigenous personnel can be trained and a Congolese unit organized, some arrangement will have to be made for utilization of the available aircraft and facilities to meet the Congolese operational needs.⁶⁷

At this stage, mid 1962, the US Government was still most reluctant to get directly militarily involved in the Congo and the objective was still to achieve a peaceful solution to the Congo crisis. To this end, all efforts were directed at supporting the United Nations' mediating initiatives.⁶⁸ However, a token shipment of some jeeps, radios and various other items was put together and delivered to the Congolese Army some weeks later.⁶⁹



The FAC bought some old transport aircraft in early 1962 and hired British crews – some of which are seen here – to fly them, but the aircraft were soon grounded since the crews left due to non-payment of salaries and general Congolese mismanagement. (Photo: via Michael Buncombe)

⁶⁷ NARA, RG 330, "Report of Special Military Advisory Team, Republic of the Congo," 23 Jul 1962, pp.4-5.

⁶⁸ See e.g. *FRUS 1961-1963*, Doc. 257, Telegram from Department of State to US Embassy Leopoldville, 10 Jul 1962.

⁶⁹ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 32, Telegram from Department of State to US Embassy Leopoldville, 31 Aug 1962.

But as soon as the FAC had received its new T-6s, the Congolese turned to the USA for help. The US Ambassador reported in late August 1962 that he had met with Congolese Prime Minister Adoula, who was happy about the arrival of the aircraft and now “wanted help in finding pilots to fly them.” The ambassador was non-committal at this point. A few days later he reminded Washington that Adoula now had six aircraft but no pilots. “He may be tempted hire no good roustabouts who willing take aggressive initiative.”⁷⁰

A couple of weeks later the ambassador made his point yet again:

For at least two weeks Adoula has had on his desk draft contracts offered by Air Panama. There also remains possibility that mercenary pilots paid for combat rather than instruction will take on job. If this happened effect on national reconciliation plan would be adverse.⁷¹

The “national reconciliation plan” mentioned was the one the UN was trying to get implemented in the Congo, with US support. There was still some hope that Katanga would make good on their promises to implement their part of the plan.

Air Panama (or Aerovias Panama SA, to give its correct name) was, despite its name, a small airline in Miami, Florida. It was flying charter for the UN in the Congo and was now trying to also get a contract with the Congolese Government. There was talk at this point of Air Panama providing training for the FAC, presumably including some support for the FAC T-6s. The US Government looked favourably on Air Panama’s proposed operations in the Congo and in return the company management was willing to assist the US Government. In mid September 1962, the Director of the CIA reported that the manager of Air Panama had visited the CIA “and volunteered any use of his facilities we need.” Whether the CIA ever took him up on the offer is unknown.⁷²

During late September 1962, the UN obtained confirmation that the Katangese Air Force was receiving a number of T-6 aircraft and this information was forwarded to both the USA and to the Congolese. The US Government was becoming increasingly worried about the military situation in the Congo, and especially that things would get out of hand and result in an unrestrained civil war. A memo to President Kennedy from the State Department at this time claimed that “our plans for the Congo are slowly sinking into the African ooze.”⁷³ There was no improvement in the situation over the next few weeks and meanwhile the Congolese Government was coming under increasing political pressure from the opposition to do something about Katanga. As already mentioned in section 4.3, by early October there were reports of the Soviet Union preparing to offer military assistance directly

⁷⁰ JFK, NSF Congo Box 31, Telegram 439 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 23 Aug 1962, and Telegram 465 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 26 Aug 1962.

⁷¹ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 32, Telegram 580 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 7 Sep 1962.

⁷² JFK, NSF Congo, Box 31, Telegram 609 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 11 Sep 1962, and Box 32, Telegram 1017 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 27 Oct 1962; CIA FOIA document 242398, Message from Director CIA to [classified], 12 Sep 1962, URL (21 Aug 2005) http://www.foia.cia.gov/search_options.asp

⁷³ FRUS 1961-1963, Doc. 293, Telegram from US Mission to UN to Department of State, 24 Sep 1962; Memo from Under Secretary Ball to President Kennedy quoted in FRUS 1961-1963, p.594.

to the Congolese Government and this was of course not something the US Government would like to see happen.

Prime Minister Adoula initially was mostly interested in transport aircraft, to move his troops in preparation for a military offensive. However, in time he took an increasing interest in having access to armed aircraft and in rebuilding the FAC. In late October, the State Department informed its UN Mission that the US Government was considering providing six “air advisors” to assist the FAC in developing its operations. There was still hope that Italy would take on this role, however.⁷⁴

Around this time the UN leadership in the Congo also brought up the state of the FAC with the US Embassy and pointed out the “desirability of procurement of pilots to fly GOC’s [Government of the Congo’s] existing inventory of aircraft. These might be civilian hired or contracted.” It was not specifically reported which FAC aircraft they were to fly and it is possible that it was mainly transport aircraft the UN had in mind. At any rate, in late October the US Government decided to finance a contract on behalf of the Congolese Government for Air Panama to operate charter aircraft for the Congolese and to maintain some of FAC’s transport aircraft.⁷⁵

6.2. Decision Time

By the end of October 1962, there were reports of Katangan aircraft carrying out attacks on ANC troops in northern Katanga and for the first time the Congolese Government asked USA directly for combat aircraft, since “only military pressure would inspire truly conciliatory action by [Katangan President] Tshombe.”⁷⁶ At this time Adoula also had a meeting with Lawrence (“Larry”) Devlin from the US Embassy. Devlin was the CIA Chief of Station in the Congo at the time, something which Adoula was likely aware of. After some discussion of the political situation,

Adoula closed meeting by raising point near and dear to his heart – airplanes. [...] Adoula said a few planes would do more to maintain his government in power than anything else USG [US Government] could do. He noted GOK [Government of Katanga] continuing to increase its military strength by importing planes, including jets, arms and mercenaries. Said if he failed take action counter this GOK build-up, his political enemies would use this as weapon to attack and perhaps bring down government. He emphasized GOC possession planes would provide great psychological boost for his government and would give GOK pause. In addition, planes would cause other provinces which might be tempted to ignore GOC to remain loyal, as they would know that government power was only few hours away. Adoula spoke at great length of GOC needs for planes and urged that this point of view be brought to attention of USG officials.⁷⁷

At the same time the Congolese Foreign Minister had a meeting with officials in Washington and also expressed similar views. He believed that if the Central Government had “three fighter aircraft,” Tshombe would begin negotiating immediately.

⁷⁴ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 32, Telegram from Department of State to US Mission to UN, 25 Oct 1962.

⁷⁵ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 32, Telegram 1015 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 27 Oct 1962; UN, DAG-13/1.6.1.0:78, Copy of Contract between Government of the Republic of the Congo and Aerovias Panama, 1 Dec 1962; *FRUS 1961-1963*, Doc. 320, Memorandum of Conversation, 31 Oct 1962.

⁷⁶ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 32, Telegram from Department of State to US Embassy Leopoldville, etc., 31 Oct 1962.

⁷⁷ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 32, Telegram 1023 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 30 Oct 1962.

The UN option was also being discussed in Washington and on 7 November President Kennedy “reluctantly approved” a recommendation by some of his advisors to assist the United Nations in securing an additional squadron of fighter aircraft with pilots from a European country, and if necessary to provide a squadron of US aircraft (but no pilots) to the UN.⁷⁸

On 10 November 1962, by which time the military situation had deteriorated further for the Central Government, Adoula asked for immediate assistance in obtaining rockets for his T-6s, to counter the Katangese offensive. In reality, however, there was very little fighting and the “offensive” was largely in the minds of the ANC, which had exceedingly poor morale. The US Ambassador noted that Adoula “did not ask for pilots for planes, machine gun ammo, or bombs as I had anticipated he would do.” The Congolese had no faith in the ability of the UN to stop the Katangese and wanted to get the means to do it themselves. A couple of days later the Congolese contacted the Israeli Embassy, asking for bombs, saying it was a “life and death matter” and that the ANC positions would disintegrate without air support.⁷⁹ The US Ambassador advised Washington against refusing the rockets but suggested that they might not have to arrive straight away: “Besides delays imposed by real technical obstacles, we can always find means to drag feet.” On the other hand he did make the point that the rockets should eventually be delivered, since it was not in the best interest of the USA to have the FAC “as a force for show alone.”⁸⁰

The same telegram, dated 15 November 1962, is noteworthy for another reason: it is the first time there is mention of “Adoula’s 6 Cuban pilots from Caribbean Aero-Marine Corps [*sic*],” although it was not made clear if they had yet arrived. These were the pilots hired by the CIA. It is evident therefore that the proposal to provide pilots through the CIA had been made before this date, that the decision to do so had been taken, and that the pilots had in fact been hired or at least were in the process of being hired. This is as close as it is currently possible to date the “birth” of the CIA air unit in the Congo since no documentation is as yet available from the CIA’s files. It is quite possible that the meeting between Adoula and Devlin two weeks earlier had been what finally set the process in motion but the decision had no doubt progressively matured during the escalation of events during the autumn. Under the circumstances it was quite natural that the CIA rather than the US military was chosen to make the necessary arrangements to hire pilots, since this would allow the US Government to distance itself from the pilots and their operations if necessary, while at the same time retaining considerable control over their actions.

According to Devlin, it was primarily the US Ambassador in the Congo who was behind the initiative to hire the pilots. The number of telegrams from the ambassador to Washington concerning

⁷⁸ Kalb (1982) p.359-360, based on Department of State documents.

⁷⁹ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 33, Telegram 1113 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 12 Nov 1962, and Telegram from Department of State to US Embassy Leopoldville, 13 Nov 1962.

⁸⁰ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 33, Telegram 1133 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 15 Nov 1962.

aircraft, often dealing with quite minor details of armament, etc., does indeed indicate that he took a very personal interest in the matter. The pilots, and thereby the T-6 aircraft, were intended primarily as a goodwill gesture towards the Congolese Government and as a warning towards the Katangese. The aircraft and pilots were there “just in case,” to provide the option to take action if the situation so required. More than anything, the effect was considered to be psychological.⁸¹

6.3. The Cubans Arrive

To find suitable personnel for its new air unit in the Congo, the CIA had turned to a group it already had had considerable dealings with: the exile Cubans living in Florida.

In late 1961 Luis Cosme, who had been Chief of Operations for the CIA air unit in the Bay of Pigs operation, went to Washington to get help for the Cuban exile pilots in obtaining licences valid in the USA. After some discussions, the CIA agreed to pay for this and deposited some \$25,000 with the Emery Riddle School of Aeronautics in Miami. This was sufficient for the training of about 20 pilots. The training was provided free of charge, without any strings attached, and was seen as a way to say “thank you” for services rendered in the past. The CIA also appointed an officer by the name of George (“Jerry”) Sohl to keep an eye on things and to act as liaison with the Cubans.⁸²

When the requirement for pilots for the Congo came up, it was therefore quite natural for the CIA to approach the Cubans in Miami. This also fitted in with the CIA’s general preference for third national personnel in this type of operation. Five pilots were initially recruited, most of them from the group training at Emery Riddle and all but one of them veterans from the Bay of Pigs. The selection was made with the assistance of Cosme, who picked pilots known to him personally, and the contracts were written at his house. The salary was \$800 a month, plus expenses, and the contracts were for six months. A single Cuban aircraft mechanic was also hired.⁸³

The pilots were officially hired by a company called Caribbean Aeromarine Co., which had been incorporated in Florida in April 1962. Among the (many) other activities listed in its registration, the company was said to “employ personnel and to provide for their training and instruction” in the “operation, service, maintenance and repair” of aircraft. In reality, this was a front company for the CIA, a so-called “proprietary.” These were (and are) companies formed for the purpose of facilitating CIA activities and there were dozens, if not hundreds of them, in a great variety of fields. Some were formed just to be at hand if needed and often the official board of directors and owners were local lawyers. This was apparently also the case with Caribbean Aeromarine, since all three members of the board gave the same office building as their official address.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Interview Devlin.

⁸² Interviews Cosme and Medel.

⁸³ Interviews Cosme, García and Maza.

⁸⁴ Div. of Corp., File B58132, “Certificate of Incorporation of Caribbean Aeromarine Co.,” 17 Apr 1962; Marchetti & Marks (1974), pp.146ff.

The exact date when the Cubans were hired is not known. Likely it was only two or three weeks before they travelled to the Congo, however. Before leaving for Africa, they were given a check-out on the T-6 aircraft type by a former US Navy pilot in Miami. There was also some training in formation flying. This caused no major problems for the Cubans since four of them had flown the T-6 in the Cuban Air Force or Cuban Navy.⁸⁵

By all accounts the Cubans arrived in the Congo sometime in November 1962, probably around the middle of the month. Jerry Sohl went with them as manager. Officially they were there on contract directly for the Congolese and they were therefore issued with ANC passes. The Cubans all had false documents showing them to be from Guatemala, the Dominican Republic and so on, but it was generally known around town that they were Cubans. Furthermore, the Congolese called them “les techniciens américains” (the American technicians) – implying a US origin rather than from the American continent in general – so it was really no big secret locally that the USA had been involved in recruiting them.⁸⁶ Despite this, it is apparent that the media did not pick up on this at the time.



The first group of Cuban CIA pilots in the Congo, in front of one of their aircraft. From the left: Joaquín “Pupi” Varela (who arrived a few weeks after the others, replacing another pilot), Eduardo “Mulato” Herrera, Mario Ginebra, Rafael “Huevo” García and Alfredo “Pavo” Maza. (Photo: via Rafael García)

⁸⁵ Interviews García and Maza.

⁸⁶ UN, DAG-13/1.6.5.8.4.0:3, List of people employed by Caribbean Aeromarine, n.d. [has handwritten comment dated 23 Nov 1962 stating these were “ANC mercenaries”]; Interview García.

The T-6 aircraft were based at the N'Dolo airfield in Leopoldville, where the FAC also had its flying school, and here the Cubans were allocated a small office. At first the aircraft were not armed and there was not much for the Cubans to do, except make formation flights over and around the capital to let everyone know that the FAC was now “operational.” Since they got paid extra per flying hour, they flew most every day. The aircraft were in good condition and what technical problems there were, were solved by the Cuban chief mechanic and his Congolese assistants.⁸⁷

6.4. The Crisis Peaks

A few days after their arrival, Sohl and the Cubans were taken to see Colonel Mobutu, the Chief-of-Staff of the ANC. He requested that they immediately go to Katanga to attack some Katangese troops who were surrounding one of his units. This they could not do, officially for the very practical reason that their aircraft were still unarmed.⁸⁸

The US Government still wanted to avoid contributing to any escalation of the military conflict. Nevertheless, on 25 November Washington decided to supply a “reasonable quantity” of rockets, “once technical details [have been] clarified.” By early December Adoula was very discouraged and claimed “his government in ruins and security of country at stake.” He went on to say that “Tshombe was bombarding his troops and villages daily and US and UN seemed powerless. Meanwhile Cuban pilots appeared under wraps and US was delaying delivery of rockets.” The US Ambassador urged Washington to speed up the delivery of the rockets, to counter Soviet offers of military supplies believed to be imminent, and suggested telling the Congolese that they were on their way. At this point the ambassador was quite pessimistic about the situation and feared a collapse.⁸⁹

The Congo situation received a lot of attention in Washington in this period and the notes from the daily staff meeting at the White House on 10 December 1962 contained the following comments:

After a little pessimistic brooding around the table, the discussion turned to broader issues. [...] Bundy, Kaysen and Dungan said that one of the best things that could happen might be for the Congolese National Army to drop a few bombs in the Katanga from a few aircraft which the United States would furnish them for that purpose. The idea seemed to be that this would tend to remove a lot of the intricate complexities of the Congo problem (UN, UMHK, etc.) and perhaps reduce it to a nice clean war between Leopoldville and Elisabethville. There was a little laughter around the table at this suggestion; for example, Bundy said that “we were all certainly a bunch of hawks,” but there was an unmistakable undercurrent of seriousness nevertheless.⁹⁰

The US ambassador in the Congo notified Washington that the rockets for the T-6s arrived on 17 December 1962, to Adoula’s “intense gratification,” and would be fitted as quickly as possible: “Two

⁸⁷ Interview Maza.

⁸⁸ Interviews García and Maza.

⁸⁹ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 33, Telegram from Department of State to US Embassy Leopoldville, 25 Nov 1962, Telegram 1321 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 6 Dec 1962, Telegram 1314 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 6 Dec 1962, Telegram 1352 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 8 Dec 1962.

⁹⁰ Quoted in *FRUS 1961-1963*, p.716. McGeorge Bundy and Ralph Dungan were Special Assistants to President Kennedy and Carl Kaysen was a member of the National Security Council staff. Leopoldville and Elisabethville were the capitals of the Congo and Katanga, respectively.

USAFE technicians in civilian clothes already arrived will do quiet in and out job, hopefully within four days.” The air unit would then enter training “which depending on political and military situation may or may not be publicized.” The ambassador went on to say:

I recommend that one month from now group be combat ready and their use for limited missions be seriously considered, for following reasons:

A. This will have been almost three [*sic*; in reality two] months from time original request was made for 48 hour delivery. Further delay very difficult to justify.

B. Crunch in Congo could occur in months’ time. We will want ANC light attack plane capability under disciplined control. At same time this month should see restoration of ONUC fighter capability, absence of which made it reasonable in first place to accede to GOC request.

He also made the point that the US Government had the “capability of keeping [the aircraft] out of combat altogether.” This was of course due to the fact that the CIA controlled the pilots.⁹¹

By this time the Cuban pilots had been informed that they might be expected to mount an attack on the Avikat base at Kolwezi. Once the rocket rails had been fitted to the aircraft, they were flown to an airfield some distance from Leopoldville where the pilots began practicing for their attack.⁹²

Meanwhile, the United Nations also continued its attempts to find additional fighter aircraft. Although Sweden had agreed in late November to send reinforcements to its unit, this was on the condition that other nations would also contribute aircraft. In early and mid December the UN tried to persuade – among others – Greece, Iran, Italy, Pakistan and the Philippines to contribute aircraft or crews, but the negotiations dragged out. Eventually the Philippines agreed to provide some pilots to fly aircraft provided by Italy while Iran promised both aircraft and crews, but it was clear that neither would arrive in the Congo for several weeks. In some of these cases the USA was quietly providing diplomatic support behind the scenes. In the case of the aircraft from Italy, the US Government did in effect provide the aircraft as well, since these had been supplied as US aid and were technically the property of the USA and not Italy.⁹³

The option to use US military forces was still kept open and in fact received new attention during December, due to the worsening political situation in the Congo. The Joint Chiefs of Staff wrote a recommendation on 11 December 1962, stating among other things their belief that “the central issue of the Congolese problem is to keep a pro-Western regime in power.” This would remain a problem as long as the Katanga problem was not resolved. They therefore recommended, “[i]f required to prevent the collapse of the Central Government, [to] offer the UN a US military package consisting of one Composite Air Strike Unit with necessary support elements.”⁹⁴

A detailed plan was also drawn up, to send a fighter squadron with eight jet fighters and two reconnaissance aircraft. In the draft of the plan, many of the woes of the country were listed,

⁹¹ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 33, Telegram 1452 from US Embassy Leopoldville to Secretary of State, 18 Dec 1962.

⁹² Interviews García and Maza.

⁹³ Hellström (2003) p.65 & p.221.

⁹⁴ FRUS 1961-1963, Doc. 353, Memorandum from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Secretary of Defense, 11 Dec 1962.

including “the instability and administrative flabbiness” of the Adoula Government and the latent threat of Soviet military assistance.

These factors all underline the urgency of injecting a new element into the Congo situation to avert the failure and withdrawal of the UN – which would result in either a massive US unilateral effort, or failing that, the emergence of an extremist or Communist-dominated government in Leopoldville.⁹⁵

This view from the Pentagon was perhaps a bit more drastic than that from the White House and the State Department, but this was only a difference in degree.

The State Department wrote just before Christmas that, “[o]ne of the most difficult problems facing Adoula and GOC is continuing handicap they face in virtual freedom of air enjoyed by Katanga Air Force,” and suggested that the UN should destroy the Avikat on the ground, thereby indicating that air support for the Congolese obviously still had a high priority. An American general was sent to the Congo on a fact-finding mission and one of his main tasks was to “[a]ssess the need for a US tactical fighter squadron ... in the Congo and to determine how this force could best be employed to advance US objectives in the Congo.” According to Kalb, one reason for this mission was for President Kennedy to delay having to take a decision on the subject.⁹⁶

In the end President Kennedy agreed to send the fighter unit if the United Nations made an official request for the USA to do so. This request was made on 29 December and on the same day a fighter wing of the USAFE began “planning and co-ordination...for a higher headquarters tasked move of a squadron of F-84 aircraft to a classified forward operating location.”⁹⁷

The aircraft situation at the end of December 1962 was therefore as follows:

1. The United Nations fighter force had received some Swedish reinforcements, but the Swedish unit was considered unreliable and ineffective. Additional units from other countries had been promised but would take some weeks to arrive.
2. A unit of the US Air Force had just started preparations to move to the Congo from Europe, to form part of the UN forces, but this too would take some time.
3. The “Congolese Air Force,” i.e. the CIA air unit, had received its rocket armament and was training for a possible strike on Katanga in mid January or so.

6.5. The End of Katanga and After

But by now time had run out in the Congo. Some fighting had broken out between UN and Katangese troops on Christmas Eve and when this continued, UN Headquarters eventually decided

⁹⁵ NARA, RG 218, Folder 091 Congo, “Composite Air Strike Unit in Support of ONUC,” undated draft [c.15 Dec 1962]; “Operating Plan for the Congo,” undated draft [Dec 1962].

⁹⁶ JFK, NSF Congo, Box 33, Telegram from Department of State to US Mission to UN, 21 Dec 1962; NARA, RG 218 Folder 091 Congo, “Instructions for the Congo Military Mission,” Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff to Lt.Gen. L. W. Truman, 19 Dec 1962; Kalb (1982) p.365.

⁹⁷ FRUS 1961-1963, Doc. 389, Defense Dept. Memorandum, 29 Dec 1962; AFHRA, Microfilm reel N0487, “Historical Report, 366th Tactical Fighter Wing,” for 1 Jul – 31 Dec 1962.

to strike back. By all accounts this was initially seen as just another “police action” and there was no indication that the UN expected any major changes to result. On 29 December the Swedish fighter unit, F 22, attacked the Avikat base at Kolwezi and over the next couple of days the Katangese air force was almost totally destroyed on the ground. The few aircraft that survived fled to Angola. At the same time, the UN ground forces moved forward and quickly captured the remaining Katangese strongholds with little or no resistance and on 14 January the Katangan secession formally ended.⁹⁸

It is clear that both the United Nations and the US Government were taken by surprise by the events and there was reluctance to accept that, in the end, it had all been so easy. The ease with which the Avikat had been destroyed surprised most parties (except perhaps the Swedes) and as late as 11 January, by which the Avikat had been completely wiped out, the opinion in Washington was that “estimates of damage to it have been greatly exaggerated.” Even so, it was suggested that there was no longer any point in sending US aircraft to the Congo and the deployment was soon cancelled.⁹⁹

The machinery to send the Philippine and Iranian fighter squadrons had already been set in motion, however, and both units were allowed to go to the Congo, even though no longer needed. They stayed only a few months before returning home, however. The Swedish F 22 was then the only UN fighter unit in the Congo for a time before it, too, disbanded in September 1963.¹⁰⁰

With Katanga gone, there was no longer any immediate need for the CIA air unit, either. Adoula’s Government was relatively safe for the time being and there were no immediate internal or external enemies threatening military action. Even so, the Cuban pilots were left in place and they continued to fly the T-6s around Leopoldville, “to show the flag.”¹⁰¹ It was a relatively cheap way for the US Government to provide support for the Congolese Government. Also, with Katanga gone the Congo situation was largely de-fused and there was little or no political risk involved.

Things remained more or less unchanged, apart from periodic changes of personnel, until early 1964, when a revolt against the Central Government broke out in the Kwilu province, some distance east of Leopoldville. The rebellion became known as the “Mulele Revolt,” after its leader, Pierre Mulele. A few weeks after the revolt started, the CIA air unit deployed to the front and subsequently flew many ground attack missions in support of the ANC. In a very unusual arrangement, the CIA aircraft would also fly air cover for rescue helicopters of the United Nations when these went to pick up refugees from Protestant and Catholic mission stations in remote areas, while the UN in return promised to provide a rescue service for any Cuban pilot forced to crash land or bail out.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Weissman (1974) pp.189-191.

⁹⁹ *FRUS 1961-1963*, Doc. 410, State Dept. Memorandum, 11 Jan 1963.

¹⁰⁰ Hellström (2003) pp.66-69.

¹⁰¹ Interview García.

¹⁰² Interviews von Bayer and García.



Two of the Cuban CIA pilots putting on an air display in Leopoldville in the autumn of 1963, in front of General Mobutu and a large crowd of Congolese. (Photo: via Margarita Varela)

Later in 1964, when a second, more serious revolt broke out further east in the Congo, the CIA air unit was greatly expanded and received more modern aircraft directly from the USA. In the event, the last CIA paid pilots did not finally leave the Congo until late 1967.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ Interview García.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The overall purpose of this paper, as stated in the introduction, has been to look into the background to the US decision to provide air support to the Congo in 1962 and to see how this decision fitted into the overall situation in the Congo at that time. There were also some specific questions and each of these will be addressed below, followed by some other observations.

7.1. Why was there a requirement for combat aircraft in the Congo in late 1962?

The Congolese requirement for armed aircraft was in direct response to the re-building of the Katangese Air Force (the Avikat) during the autumn of 1962. The Avikat was actually not much of a fighting force even at its peak and its ten or so armed aircraft could do little more than make noise. Even though the Congolese made several references to air attacks on the Congolese Army (the ANC) by the Avikat, it is likely that the actual casualties caused were light, if not insignificant. At least there are no independent reports verifying the effectiveness of these supposed attacks. The effect on the ANC was mainly psychological – knowing that your enemy have aircraft, whether effective or not, and that you have none – but this was enough to seriously hamper the military operations of the Central Government. More importantly than the actual military disadvantages, however, was the perceived inability of the government to take action against Katanga, or even to defend itself from Katangan attacks. The political enemies of Adoula's government – which was weak at the best of times – threatened to bring the government down if the situation did not improve in the very near future.

Up to this point, the Congolese Air Force (the FAC) had received little attention by the Congolese Government and was consequently poorly developed and unable to provide any serious air support to the ANC. The FAC lacked both armed aircraft and pilots, not to mention competent leadership. There were long-term solutions to these problems, e.g. the training of Congolese personnel, but these were of little use in solving the immediate crisis.

The requirement was thus very real, in the sense that the government had no air power at all under its direct control and that this made the government politically vulnerable, but the requirement was rather more questionable from a purely military point of view.

7.2. How did the USA get involved?

Since Adoula had a requirement he could not solve himself he had to turn elsewhere for a solution and it was only natural for him to turn to the United States. After all, the USA had helped him into power and was a staunch, if somewhat low-key supporter of his government.

Why, then, did the USA care what happened in the Congo in 1962? There is no single answer to this question and there have been some alternative views put forward over the years. Most historians

will agree, however, that the Cold War mentality played a very important part and this is also the impression given when studying the files and when talking to former CIA personnel.

With hindsight it is likely that the Soviet threat in Africa at this time was exaggerated and it is perhaps doubtful whether Khrushchev would have been willing to risk a second round of humiliation in the Congo. Weissman argues that certain factions at the State Department played up the Soviet threat for its own political purposes.¹⁰⁴ In fact, the Soviet Union was reassessing its African policy at this time and would not be very active on the continent for the next several years. Partly based on the lessons learned in the Congo, Soviet would also build up its long-distance aviation and naval power during the rest of the 1960s and the 1970s, to improve its capability to project power around the globe.¹⁰⁵ In 1962 this capability was in fact quite poor. On the other hand, the very same Cold War thinking meant that the USA was reluctant to provoke the Soviet Union and its allies needlessly and after 1960, the tacit understanding was for both parties to keep their hands off the Congo. One should also keep in mind that the events in the Congo took place during and just after the Cuban missile crisis of October 1962, which meant that relations were unusually strained.

The US Government would therefore have been happy to maintain a *status quo* in the Congo, hoping for an eventual solution through the efforts of the United Nations. But on the other hand it could not easily ignore the pleadings of a friendly government. In the end it was threat of the Adoula Government falling, to be replaced by a “radical” government, or perhaps a whole slew of secessionist governments in various parts of the country, that prompted the USA to take action. The alternative was to risk the possible collapse of the Kennedy administration’s whole Congo policy, which would in turn have repercussions throughout Africa. Even so, the Americans obviously got dragged into the affair with considerable reluctance and at more than one point President Kennedy did in fact consider pulling out of the Congo altogether.¹⁰⁶

Even though the matter of aircraft and air support was indeed an important issue in the Congolese–American relations in late 1962, it would be an exaggeration to present it as the only one of importance at the time, or even to say that the fate of the Congolese Government rested solely on the question of airpower. That was of course not the case. From the available sources it is apparent, however, that it was a matter which was high on the agenda both on the Congolese and the US sides.

7.3. Which different options did the USA have?

A main consideration of the US Government was to avoid, as far as possible, causing any protests against its actions in the Congo, since the USA was still officially in full support of having the UN

¹⁰⁴ Weissman (1974) p.186.

¹⁰⁵ Gann (1988) p.19.

¹⁰⁶ See e.g. Kalb (1982) pp.359-361.

handle the Katanga problem. This had a direct impact on the options being contemplated when it came to providing air support to the Congolese. In brief, much effort was spent on finding a way to have your cake and eat it, i.e. to make sure the Congolese got the support they needed while at the same time not aggravating any other nations more than necessary. Bearing the above in mind, the three main options were: to assist the UN in obtaining aircraft and aircrew from other nations than the USA; to provide aircraft and crews from the US Air Force (preferably under the UN umbrella); or to arrange pilots for the existing FAC aircraft through the CIA.

In the end, the US Government elected to go ahead with all three options. It seems the move to hire the CIA pilots was initiated in late October or early November 1962, the UN began looking in earnest for additional fighters in early December and the US Air Force was ordered to send a unit to the Congo in late December. Despite these differences in initiation dates, all three solutions were eventually expected to provide aircraft ready for action by mid January 1963. As it turned out, by that time the Katanga problem had already been solved through other means and the whole question of additional air support became moot.

7.4. Why was the CIA ordered to set up an air unit and how was this done?

As described in Chapter 5, the idea behind having the CIA set up an air unit was that this would be a way to retain control over the operations without exposing the USA to unacceptable political risks. Officially the whole thing had nothing to do with the US Government and was instead a case of the Congolese Government hiring a group of Central American contract pilots through a civilian company in Miami. The CIA was the US agency most experienced in this kind of operation, which could also be said to loosely fit into the part of its charter directing the CIA to involve itself in the “support of indigenous anti-communist elements in threatened countries of the free world.”

The CIA in the early 1960s was a very powerful organization, with a virtually unlimited budget and with a marked “can do” attitude. Its prestige had suffered somewhat from the Bay of Pigs debacle in 1961 and President Kennedy did not place quite the same degree of trust in large para-military operations as had President Eisenhower. On the other hand, though, 1961 onward saw an increasing focus on anti-guerrilla and other “peripheral” or “brush-fire” wars in the third world. This was a direct result of the Soviet Union’s pledge early that year to support “wars of liberation” around the world. The branches of the US military set about expanding its special forces and greatly increased its capabilities to carry out commando-style operations with small units.¹⁰⁷

The dividing line between the CIA’s para-military capabilities and the special forces of e.g. the US Army and US Air Force was not always distinct and at times there was overlap and a certain degree of blurring between the two. An example of this are two air operations carried out in South-

¹⁰⁷ Prados (1996) p.218ff.

East Asia in 1961, when the USAF carried out a covert operation in Vietnam (pretending to be a part of the Vietnamese Air Force) while the CIA set up a clandestine operation in Thailand, for operations over Laos. Both operations were about the same size, were intended for the same type of missions and even operated the same type of aircraft. In addition, the CIA operation used mainly USAF pilots on loan.¹⁰⁸ The point here is that the CIA was seen as just another tool by the US Government, that it was an organisation on par with any of the branches of the regular armed forces and that sending in the CIA was not necessarily considered a very dramatic decision. It was more a question of what was most practical in each given situation. In the Congo in 1962, using the CIA was apparently seen as a practical solution.

It is precisely here, when it come to the exact reasoning behind the decision to involve the CIA, that the lack of access to the CIA files is the most handicapping. No doubt some documents do exist, which lay out the arguments for using the CIA, but these have not been available when preparing this paper. Even so, it is unlikely that the documents would paint a completely different picture than that given here. As likely as not, it would mainly be the details that would differ.

Since it was not feasible to hide the air unit completely, the CIA ran it as a covert operation, i.e. pretending that it was something it was not, namely a civilian undertaking. Time was short and it was natural to turn to the Cuban pilots who had previously served the CIA at the Bay of Pigs. The initial arrangements were quite basic and involved little more than hiring a handful of people, providing some very basic training and then sending them off to the Congo under the supervision of an American CIA officer.



The original photo caption, made by one of the pilots, translates: "Loading rockets at Thysville after a mission – Africa." Thysville was the place where the Cubans trained for their attack on Katanga. (Photo: via Margarita Varela)

¹⁰⁸ Hagedorn & Hellström (1994) pp.132-147.

Compared with the earlier CIA air operations, the early operations in the Congo were small-scale and uncomplicated, not least because they operated in a “friendly” country and could operate relatively openly right in the capital. The aircraft were already there and the logistics support was uncomplicated. At first they were mainly “window dressing” since their aircraft lacked armament and it actually took around two months before they were combat ready. Things might have been different if they had been called on to actually go into combat against Katanga but this never happened.

7.5. Was the CIA unit used as intended?

That does of course depend on what the real intention was and here it is apparent that there were several distinct motives behind its creation. One intention was to use the unit to knock out the Avikat, if the situation so demanded. This was not done, for the simple reason that it did not prove necessary. However, the pilots were in training for such a mission and it is quite possible that an attack on Katanga would have been carried out, if the timing had been a bit different. A second, related intention was to give Adoula the possibility of using the unit as a bargaining chip when dealing with Katanga. It is unclear if he actually did so or, if so, whether the Katangans made any concessions due to this threat, but there is no indication that there was much of an effect in this regard. The third intention was to prop up Adoula’s government by showing the opposition that he was capable of taking action to counter the Katangan threat and in this regard the unit was likely of some effect even if it is difficult to say exactly how effective. At any rate, the Adoula Government remained in power. The fourth and final intention was to help pre-empt any Soviet offers to provide air support. Again it is difficult to assess exactly how important the unit was in this regard but at least no firm Soviet offer of assistance ever appeared.

On balance, therefore, it is probably fair to say that the creation of the CIA air unit had at least some of the intended effect even if there is no real proof that the developments in the Congo in late 1962 and early 1963 would have been markedly different, had it not existed.

Another and most likely more important result of setting up the unit in 1962 was that it served as a nucleus for the expanded CIA air unit in the Congo that came into existence in 1964, and that year the CIA air support *was* critical to the survival of the Congolese Central Government. Already in the spring of 1964 the CIA pilots with their T-6 aircraft helped stop the advance of the Mulele rebellion in the Kwilu province, not too distant from Leopoldville. From the summer of 1964 the CIA in the Congo received additional, and more modern aircraft, and also recruited a much larger air unit which was to grow to a personnel strength of hundreds of people. This expanded unit was to have a decisive role in defeating the rebellions in the eastern part of the Congo, from 1964 to 1966.

7.6. Kennedy's Decision Making

As mentioned in section 3.2, Weissman and others have argued that President John F. Kennedy was at times overly cautious and that he had trouble making clear decisions. Also, that as a result decisions having a major impact on US policy were often taken by persons in lower positions. Is this borne out by the evidence in this particular case?

One clear indication that there was some problems in the decision making process is the fact that the US Government ended up not deciding on one course of action, but rather ended up working all three major options when it came to arranging air support for the Congolese: the UN option, the USAF option and the CIA option. This gives the impression of a "belt and braces" style approach, i.e. covering all the different bets, just in case. A bolder president may have decided to just go with one option, and to put all the US efforts into that option alone.

However, it is of course dangerous to draw too many conclusions from such a limited subject as this one and it may well be that the decision made in this case is not representative of President Kennedy's actions in general. The situation in the Congo was complex and delicate for several reasons and this did of course influence the decision making. Generally speaking, it is clear that the decision was very closely tied to the political situation in the Congo, and was directly triggered by the events unfolding there. The US Government did not take the lead on this issue but rather reacted to increasingly urgent demands from the Congolese themselves. In fact, it is apparent that it was only with considerable reluctance that actions were finally taken to provide effective air support of any kind.

One might conclude, therefore, that the available evidence does at least not disprove Weissman's argument but to go further than that would probably not be prudent.

7.7. Summary

In the autumn of 1962, the US Government decided to provide combat air support to the friendly Adoula Government in the Congo. This was done to help counter the threat of the air force of the secessionist Katangan Republic. The underlying motives were to help protect Adoula from his political enemies and to keep the Soviets from gaining influence by making a similar offer first.

All in all, it can be argued that the whole matter turned out to be "much ado about nothing," since none of the three options eventually selected actually produced any air support in time to affect the military operations against Katanga. Whether the attempts to provide air power in general, and the CIA air unit in particular, actually did anything to preserve Adoula's Government in power is difficult to ascertain. It is possible that the mere presence of the Cubans, ineffective or not, did something to shore up the government. The original intention was, after all, largely to have something "up the sleeve" if needed. And one of the main principles of military thinking is that the most

successfully fought battle is the one which you do not have to fight at all, because the enemy is scared into submission at the very sight of your forces.

It is always difficult to prove something that didn't happen and this case is no exception. At any rate, the Adoula Government did not fall in late 1962 time but survived well into 1964, at which time Adoula stepped down more or less voluntarily. Nor did the Congolese ever feel compelled to officially turn to the Soviet Union for assistance, either in 1962 or later. And since the preservation of the Central Government and the shutting out of the Soviets were the two main concerns of the US Government in this matter, it can certainly be argued that the creation of the air unit was a success.

In a larger perspective, it may be that – as noted earlier – the most important consequence of the creation of the air unit was that it blazed the trail for the hugely expanded air operation of 1964 onwards. Since the defeat of the new rebellions did, among other things, lead to General Mobutu taking power in the Congo, the effects were to be felt for many years to come, and are indeed still felt in the Congo today.



Bomber aircraft for the CIA air unit are having their US Air Force markings removed after arriving at Leopoldville airport in August 1964. (Photo: Maury Bourne)

8. ABBREVIATIONS

See Sources list for abbreviations of archives and document collections.

ANC	Armée National Congolaise (Congolese National Army)
Avikat	Aviation Katangaise (Katangese military aviation)
Avimil	Aviation Militaire de la Force Publique (Belgian colonial air unit)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
Doc.	Document
FAB	Force Aérienne Belge (Belgian Air Force)
FAC	Force Aérienne Congolaise (Congolese Air Force)
GOC	Government of the Congo
GOK	Government of Katanga
Lt.Gen.	Lieutenant-General
Mil Info	Military Information (UN intelligence organization)
Mil Int	Military Intelligence
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
UMHK	Union-Minière du Haut-Katanga (Mining company)
UN	United Nations
USAF	United States Air Force
USAFE	United States Air Force in Europe (part of USAF)
USG	US Government
W/C	Wing Commander (British rank equivalent to Colonel)

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