

AIR RESUPPLY & COMMUNICATIONS SERVICE

Air Force Special Operations in the Early Cold War Era

TSgt Dale K. Robinson, USAF (ret)



In the early 1950s, the U.S. Air Force recognized a need to perform covert air operations in support of the U.S. Army and the Central Intelligence Agency. All Air Force special operations units had been deactivated following World War II, but the emerging cold war between the west and the Communist Block emphasized the need for such units. On 23 February 1951, the Air Resupply and Communications Service was established at Andrews AFB, Maryland and tasked to develop a wartime capability that included inserting, supplying, and extracting Ranger-type personnel behind enemy lines. In addition, ARCS was tasked to develop a capability to prepare, reproduce, and disseminate psychological warfare materials.

Three wings, equipped with B-29 Superfortresses, SA-16 Albatrosses, C-119 Flying Boxcars, C-54 transports and H-19 helicopters, were established to perform psychological warfare and unconventional operations. Although the

Military Air Transport Service was the parent command for the Air Resupply and Communications Service, the wings were operational arms of the Psychological Warfare Division, Directorate of Plans, HQ, USAF.

For experienced personnel, HQ USAF drew on former members of World War II's 492nd Bombardment Group, the "Carpetbaggers". The Carpetbaggers had performed clandestine missions over Nazi-occupied Europe in support of the Office of Strategic Services, forerunner of the CIA.

Taking a page from Carpetbagger operations, the B-29s were modified for low level drops of agents and special forces teams by removing the belly turret and installing a sheet metal tub and hatch. Agent drops were performed at 500 feet in the dead of night. The B-29s were also used for propaganda leaflet drops, and, using special canisters, for clandestine resupply of agents and special forces. Except for the tail guns, all armament was removed from the giant bombers. Most had all markings removed except for the national star insignia.

The H-19s and SA-16s were used for extracting individual agents and teams after the completion of their missions. The C-119s and C-54s were used for a variety of resupply, transport, and airdrop missions. The transports were augmented by both C-47 and C-118 cargo planes.



The 580th and 582nd Air Resupply and Communications Wings were established to support operations in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. The 580th activated at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho in April 1951 and relocated to Wheelus Air Base, Libya. The 580th operated in Europe and the Middle East, working with U.S. Army Special Forces based in Germany. The unit had extensive ground based printing facilities to produce propaganda leaflets to be dropped from the B-29s.



The amphibious Grumman SA-16 Albatross was a mainstay of the ARCS mission.

Between 1954 and 1956, the 580th's SA-16 flight supported U-2 overflights of Eastern Europe. The SA-16s recovered two pilots after their spy planes crashed, one in the Caspian Sea and another in the Black Sea.

The SA-16 flight also supported U.S. Army Special Forces in Europe. One mission called for an SA-16 to fly from Wheelus, land on a lake in Germany at dawn, pick up a team from the 10th Special Forces and transport them to the Royal Air Force Station at Molesworth, England. The SA-16 crew was briefed that their customers would be in a boat on the

lake, disguised as fishermen. As day broke over the lake, the plane settled down onto the water and taxied over to the only boat on the lake.

Their passengers were loaded aboard and the crew took off for England, surprised to find that the three-man Special Forces team was actually two men and a woman. They fed their customers hot soup to warm them up, remarking among themselves that they hadn't known that Special Forces now included women.

The flight arrived at Molesworth without incident and the aircraft commander reported to base operations to close his flight plan. Base ops informed him that the SA-16's mission had been scrubbed earlier that morning! A check of the "customers" revealed that they were simply three German citizens who had been out for an early morning fishing trip. The passengers said they had enjoyed the soup and thanked their hosts for the plane ride, but said they would appreciate a ride back to their boat to finish their fishing!

The 581st AR&CW was activated at Mountain Home in July 1951 and relocated to Clark AB in the Philippines. The 581st saw action during the Korean Conflict, losing at least one B-29 while flying covert ops over the Korean - Chinese border. The Chinese imprisoned the crew, including 581st AR&CW commander Colonel John K. Arnold, as war criminals engaged in "espionage". Arnold and his crew were coerced into a "confession", compromising the 581st mission. They were finally released in 1955, walking to freedom in Hong Kong from China. Co-pilot Major Wallace Brown documented the crew's experiences in his book entitled "The Endless Hours."

The 581st conducted psychological war operations, printing millions of leaflets, which were dropped on the enemy. They also supported the CIA by performing agent drops, resupply, and extractions, and by supply drops to Korean guerrillas. Other 581st combat operations in Korea included a covert detachment of four H-19s operated from a base known as K-19, which was also home to an Air Rescue Service squadron of H-19s. The 581st choppers were disguised with air rescue markings to maintain secrecy. The detachment's mission was the covert insertion and extraction of Special Forces teams behind enemy lines. In six months of operations, 581st H-19 crews logged 1,100 hours of combat time in more than 300 missions.



Sikorsky H-19 Chickasaw

(Artwork by Dale Robinson)

The detachment of six pilots and sixteen enlisted men also performed night rescue missions with their H-19s. On 15 January 1953, Captain Lawrence A. Barrett and 1st Lieutenant R.F. Sullivan flew more than 100 miles into North Korean airspace to rescue the pilot of a downed F-51 Mustang fighter. As they reached the downed pilot, enemy gunners opened fire. Barrett flew the chopper to the fighter pilot's position through the cascade of small arms fire while Sullivan operated the hoist and brought the flier aboard. Still facing heavy enemy fire, the two men piloted their helicopter to safety over the Yellow Sea. For his bravery, Captain Barrett was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. On another rescue mission, Lieutenant Sullivan

recovered Korean War fighter ace Captain Joseph McConnell from the Yellow Sea.

In addition to the H-19 support of Air Rescue, SA-16s often supported rescue efforts as well.

In the spring of 1953, the 581st was tasked to resupply French forces fighting the Vietminh in the French-Indochina War. C-119 crews shuttled back and forth between Clark AB, Da Nang, Hanoi, and Haiphong. They also trained civilian pilots to fly the C-119. Civil Air Transport, a forerunner of Air America, employed the civilians. The CAT pilots were then sent off to Hanoi.

Soon after training the CAT pilots, C-119s from bases in Japan began flowing into the maintenance depot at Clark AB. The aircraft would enter wearing U.S. markings and depart wearing French Air Force markings. 581st crews would ferry them to Hanoi and return with tired, shot-up planes. Those aircraft would go into the depot wearing French markings and come out the other end fresh and refurbished wearing U.S. markings before returning to Japan. U.S. assistance to the French continued until their final defeat in 1954 in the small Southeast Asian nation of Vietnam.



The 582nd was activated at Mountain Home in September 1951 and relocated to Molesworth, England. The

582nd worked with Army Special Forces and the CIA, performing clandestine missions in Europe and the Soviet Union, including support of U-2 over-flights. Aircrews from the 582nd also augmented the 581st in combat operations in Korea.

All three wings were downgraded to groups in 1953, but continued to perform covert operations until deactivated in 1956. Their missions were continued, on a smaller scale, by their successors. In Europe, the 42nd Troop Carrier Squadron (Special) absorbed the C-119s, the SA-16s, many of the personnel, and the mission of both the 580th and 582nd Air Resupply and Communications Groups. The unit was based at Molesworth, England, but maintained a detachment at Wheelus Field, Libya. In 1957, the 42nd traded its C-119s for C-54s and moved from

Molesworth to RAF Station Alconbury. As 1957 ended, the 42nd was closed and the Air Resupply mission in Europe closed with it.

In the Pacific, the mission of the 581st was taken over by the 322 Troop Carrier Squadron (Medium, Special), flying C-54s until the unit was deactivated in 1958.

During the early years of the cold war, the men and women of the Air Resupply and Communications Service were unsung heroes, performing an important mission vital to the security of the United States. They were the successors to the Air Commandos and Carpetbaggers of World War II, adding to the legacy of today's Air Force Special Operations Command - the Air Commandos - Quiet Professionals.



I am indebted to Carl H. Bernhardt and Colonel Robert W. Fish (USAF Ret) for lengthy telephone conversations and mail correspondence pertaining to the AR&CS and the Carpetbaggers. Mr. Bernhardt is the historian for the Air Resupply and Communications Association and editor of ARC Light, the association newsletter. Colonel Fish was a commander of the 492nd Bomb Group in World War II and a commander of the 582nd AR&CW at RAF Molesworth, England.

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.