
The UN's First "Air Force": Peacekeepers in Combat, Congo 1960–64



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Abstract

The United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC) was created in July 1960 to help the Congolese government quell its mutinous army and reestablish order. After ONUC's mandate was expanded in 1961 to stop the Katanga province's secession, a shooting war developed, in which Katanga paralyzed UN operations with a single armed jet. An aerial "arms race" and open combat followed. In December 1962 ONUC implemented Operation Grand Slam: Swedish jets neutralized Katanga's air force, and the UN's coordinated air-ground manoeuvres forcibly ended the secession. This article uncovers the unprecedented use of air power in UN peacekeeping and evaluates it for twenty-first century lessons.

The United Nations Operation in the Congo (abbreviated as ONUC for its French name: *Opération des Nations Unies au Congo*) was the largest, most complex, and most expensive UN peacekeeping mission during the Cold War. It was also the most robust operation, utilizing ground and air power in an unprecedented and, in fact, unrepeated fashion among UN peace operations. It was, for example, the only UN peace operation to date to drop bombs.¹

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1. In the Korean War, the "UN Command" utilized numerous combat aircraft but this was

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Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia thanks U.S. Air Force crew from a C-124 who are about to airlift Ethiopian troops to the UN mission in the Congo. [Debre Zeit, Ethiopia, 25 July 1960, UN Photo #183490]

The mission began as an effort to restore law and order in the Congo, a vast and newly independent country that had just elected its first democratic government. During this phase, UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld did not allow ONUC to interfere in the internal and complex issue of the secession of the Katanga province. ONUC's military operations were devoted to quelling the uprising of the riotous *Armée Nationale Congolaise* (ANC) and restoring order throughout the Congo. After Hammarskjöld's fatal plane crash while seeking a Katangan settlement in September 1961, the UN Security Council and the new Secretary-General, U Thant, adopted a firmer, more proactive stance, siding with the Congolese central government to halt Katanga's secession. This period saw a myriad of political and military Cold War intrigues, major U.S. support, a murdered prime minister, and an operational mandate more forceful than had ever been put in place for UN peacekeeping. Katangan resistance, especially in the air, necessitated the creation of the first "UN Air Force." There followed the unique story of an aerial

not a mission operated by the United Nations or its Secretary-General. The mission was authorized by the UN Security Council to engage in an enforcement action (war fighting), but it was under U.S. command with minimal direction from New York.

arms race in which UN headquarters implored its member states to contribute aircraft, while Katanga bought them clandestinely on the black market.

The United Nations suddenly became a protagonist in a series of shooting battles with Katanga in which aerial surveillance played a crucial role alongside pre-emptive air attacks against an opponent who possessed lethal aerial assets. The Security Council mandate permitted “all necessary” and “appropriate measures.”² But the United Nations had to be careful about how it justified the use of force, emphasizing self-defence and the need to secure freedom of movement for its peacekeepers. As the conflict intensified, the United Nations adopted more forceful Rules of Engagement. A contest unfolded in which the UN’s smaller air force eventually emerged triumphant over Katanga’s.

What was the UN experience with air power in this early mission and what lessons can be learned from it? This paper examines ONUC’s dangerous and forceful aerial mission, drawing from newly uncovered archival sources. The study of ONUC’s use of air power is particularly valuable as the United Nations resorts to air attacks in current operations in the Congo and elsewhere. More generally, ONUC’s experience is worth reviewing as the United Nations and the international community still seek to find the right levels of force to deal with conflicting parties, counter-insurgency, and secessionism.

Phase I: Deployment to Restore Order

During the first phase of the Congo Operation, from July 1960 to February 1961, ONUC’s principal function was to restore order throughout a vast country that had fallen into widespread lawlessness and chaos. This tragic state arose immediately following the Congo’s independence from Belgium on 30 June 1960 when the Congolese National Army (ANC) mutinied against both its Belgian officers and the Congo’s first democratically elected government. This triggered tribal uprisings against the central government. The national force that should have quelled these rebellions, notably the 25,000-strong ANC, began to plunder European property and even to beat and kill many Belgians who had remained in the Congo, as well as their fellow Congolese.³

Belgium responded by unilaterally deploying troops to the Congo to protect its citizens, in violation of its treaty with the Congo. The Congolese government of Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba and President Joseph Kasavubu refused to accept this intervention. To make matters worse, the Congo’s richest province, Katanga, declared that it would “secede from chaos.” The Katangan leader, Moïse Tshombé, asserted that if he allowed Lumumba’s mutinous troops to enter Katanga, it would only result in slaughter and lawlessness. With the encouragement of the Eisenhower administration in the United States, the Congolese government turned to the United Nations for assistance. At the urging of the much-admired Hammarskjöld, the UN Security Council established ONUC in Resolution 143 of 14 July 1960 to provide military assistance to allow the Congolese forces “to meet fully their tasks.”

2. UN Security Council Resolution 161 (1961) of 21 February.

3. Carl Von Horn, *Soldiering for Peace* (New York: David McKay Company, 1967), 152.

The Council also demanded that Belgium remove from the Congo all of its troops since they were seen an affront not only to Congolese independence but also to the global decolonization movement.⁴

During this phase of the operation, the United States provided a strategic airlift to transport an unprecedented number of UN troops into the Congo. The U.S. Military Air Transport Service, using about fifty C-124s, moved some 9,000 UN troops in about two weeks⁵ to positions across a country approximately the size of Western Europe. ONUC gradually re-established a semblance of law and order, and once the UN mission demonstrated an ability to protect civilians (including Belgian citizens) the Belgian troops began to depart. After ONUC's massive deployment was accomplished, air transport remained vital as almost all supplies had to be transported by air to ONUC troops dispersed across the vast country.⁶

During the first few months, UN troops were engaged in policing and training rather than fighting. As a result, the aerial contribution was limited to troop transport and supply. ONUC units succeeded in disarming many of the rebellious ANC troops,⁷ which helped restore a degree of law and order. At this early juncture, ONUC's mandate forbade it to interfere in internal aspects of Congolese politics; thus, it did not undertake operations to force Katanga to end its secession. In fact, Secretary-General Hammarskjöld refused to comply with Prime Minister Lumumba's demands that ONUC enter Katanga, subdue that province's rebel forces, and compel the Katangan leaders to submit to the Congo's central government. On 9 August 1960 Security Council Resolution 146 mentioned Katanga for the first time, allowing UN forces to enter Katanga, but not to "intervene in or influence the outcome of any internal conflict."⁸ Further complicating matters, the Congolese leadership fell into disarray. Kasavuba managed to eject Lumumba from power. However, the international mood of "non-interventionism" did not change until after Lumumba's murder on 17 January 1961 at the hands of his enemies in Katanga.

Phase II: The Fight for Katanga

Phase two of ONUC commenced with Security Council Resolution 161 of 21 February 1961. It authorized the UN operation to take "all appropriate

4. United Nations, *The Blue Helmets: A Review of United Nations Peacekeeping*, 2nd ed., United Nations Publication (New York: United Nations Department of Public Information, 1990), 219.

5. Indar Jit Rikhye, *Military Adviser to the Secretary-General: UN Peacekeeping and the Congo Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 193.

6. To head the air logistics, the United Nations appointed Canadian Group Captain (G/C) Bill Carr, later chief of the Canadian Forces Air Command. Rikhye, *Military Adviser*, 97. See also William (Bill) K. Carr, "The RCAF in the Congo, 1960: Among the Most Challenging Assignments Undertaken by Canadian Forces in the Peace Keeping Role," *Canadian Aviation Historical Society Journal* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 4-11, 31.

7. Von Horn, *Soldiering for Peace*, 172.

8. *Ibid.*, 225.

measures” to prevent the occurrence of civil war in the Congo, including “the use of force, if necessary, in the last resort.”⁹ This resolution was used to justify UN military operations to end the Katangan secession. Ironically, Lumumba’s death triggered the fulfillment of his demand that the United Nations forcefully support his country’s campaign against the secession. Also looming large was the threat of intervention by the Soviet Union, which was emboldened and angered after Lumumba’s murder, and Moscow’s offer to provide the Congolese government with personnel and matériel to suppress the secession. These developments combined to mobilize the West to request the United Nations to fulfill that role.

Katanga’s leader, Moïse Tshombé, professed anti-Communism and was backed by powerful Belgian and other Western interests, especially the company Union Minière du Haute Katanga.¹⁰ Also Tshombé controlled the Katangan gendarmerie and a large cadre of mercenaries. The resolve of the secessionists hardened after some 1,500 of the central government’s troops reached North Katanga in January 1961 by truck and Soviet Ilyushin Il-14 aircraft. Until that initiation of hostilities, the neutral zone negotiated by the United Nations with Tshombé on 17 October 1960 had held up but “it all came apart as pro-Lumumba troops captured Manono” in Northern Katanga.¹¹ After Manono, the situation deteriorated rapidly and negotiations broke down. In September 1961, the Indian-led UN forces in Katanga launched “Operation Morthor,” Hindi for “smash,” to round up foreign mercenaries and political advisers and to arrest Katangan officials. The “arrest” operation, which seemingly violated Hammarskjöld’s directions to ONUC, quickly escalated into open warfare.

Almost immediately, air power in Katanga was brought in as a game-changer—but not by the United Nations. At this early stage of the conflict, the Force Aérienne Katangaise (FAK) held air superiority, though it consisted of only three Fouga Magister jet trainers. Remarkably these aircraft were brought to Katanga in February 1961 aboard a Boeing Stratocruiser operated by the Seven Seas Charter Company, later identified as a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) contractor and possibly a front company. After UN officials observed the unloading of the aircraft, the mission grounded the company’s entire fleet of planes which the United Nations had earlier contracted to carry food. President John F. Kennedy decried the jet delivery and alleged in correspondence with President Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana that the transaction had taken place before the U.S.

9. *Ibid.*, 232.

10. Union Minière du Haute Katanga was “the single most important business enterprise in the Congo’s economy” because of its mines of copper, cobalt, tin, uranium, and other precious minerals. The Belgian company had, incidentally, provided the United States with most of the uranium ore used to make the 1945 Hiroshima atomic bomb. Now the giant mining company was paying its taxes to Moïse Tshombé instead of the central government, fearful that its assets would be seized by Prime Minister Lumumba. Nationalization took place in 1966 under President Mobutu Sese Seko. See Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo: From Leopold to Kabila: A People’s History* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2002), 29.

11. Rikhye, *Military Adviser*, 182.

government could stop it.¹² It was not the first time in the Congo that one branch of the U.S. government was carrying out activities at cross-purposes to another.¹³

In any case, the FAK fleet was quickly reduced in effectiveness: one Fouga Magister was lost when its pilot tried to fly under (rather than over) a power line, and UN forces captured another when they seized the airfield at Elisabethville, the Katanga capital, on 28 August 1961. This left the FAK with only one plane, but this single aircraft attained world renown during the hostilities of September by paralyzing UN supply efforts, which were mostly conducted by air transport aircraft. The single jet, flown by Belgian mercenary Joseph Deulin from Kolwezi airfield, strafed UN positions, including the UN headquarters in Katanga, and isolated a company of Irish troops who were then forced to surrender to Katanga forces. Furthermore, the Fouga jet destroyed several UN-chartered aircraft at the airport in Elisabethville.¹⁴ A U.S. State Department official, Wayne Federicks, commented: "I have always believed in air power, but I never thought I'd see the day when one plane would stop the United States and the whole United Nations."¹⁵

Deadlock prevailed, and the indecisive outcome of the UN's August and September 1961 ground initiatives in Katanga (Operations Rumpunch and

12. "UN Grounds 6 Planes; Report Says Congo Charter Carrier Aided Katanga," *New York Times*, 22 February 1961, 2. The CIA connection is described in Richard D. Mahoney, *JFK: Ordeal in Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 81. Apparently, the agency at first saw the pro-West Katanga regime as a buttress against the pro-Communist Lumumba. Further references on early CIA support to Katanga are given in Kevin Spooner, *Canada, the Congo Crisis and UN Peacekeeping, 1960–64* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 249 (footnote 8). In late 1962, when the United States was solidly against the secession of the Katanga province, the CIA put together an air combat unit to fight against the Katangans, with pilots from Cuba (anti-Castro exiles), but it did not engage in combat in the Congo until 1964 during the "Mulele Revolt." Lief Hellström, *The Instant Air Force: The Creation of the CIA Air Unit in the Congo, 1962* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2008), 34, 39.

13. In 1960–61, the CIA sought the assassination of Congolese Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba by poison to make it look like Lumumba died of natural causes. At the same time, the United States was the main backer of ONUC which was guarding the prime minister to make sure he was safe from attack. Source: Senate Select Committee to Study Governmental Operations with Respect to Intelligence Activities (the "Church Committee"), *Alleged Assassination Plots Involving Foreign Leaders* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1975), 33.

14. Robert Craig Johnson, "Heart of Darkness: the Tragedy of the Congo, 1960–67," *Chandelle: A Journal of Aviation History* 2, no. 3 (October 1997): 11, available at <http://worldatwar.net/chandelle/v2/v2n3/congo.html>. In fact, Katanga had begun aerial attacks in this conflict on 30 January 1961 by using two converted commercial aircraft to bomb Manono and attack the UN garrison there, though the attack was not aimed at the United Nations but rather at the pro-Lumumba Congolese army that was forcefully entering Katanga. See Stephen R. Weissman, *American Foreign Policy in the Congo* (London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 183.

15. Quoted in Håvard Kleberg, "Logistical and Combat Air Power in ONUC," in *Use of Air Power in Peace Operations*, ed. Carsten F. Ronnfeldt and Per Erik Solli (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 1997), 36–37.

Morthor) spurred Hammarskjöld to try to negotiate a cease-fire with Tshombé. As the Secretary-General was flying to meet with the Katangan leader at the border town of Ndola, Northern Rhodesia, his plane crashed on the night of 17 September 1961, killing all onboard. Complicating the rescue effort, the plane had largely maintained radio silence and flew a circuitous route mostly at night in order to reduce the possibility of an attack by the “Lone Ranger” Fouga Magister. The Katangan jet had shot bullets into the UN aircraft only days before, but the damage was repaired by the time Hammarskjöld was flown in it. The cause of the UN plane crash was never determined with certainty, though a UN commission concluded that it was probably due to pilot error during the approach to Ndola.¹⁶

With Hammarskjöld’s death, the battle for Katanga entered a new phase. The new Secretary-General, U Thant, did not share Hammarskjöld’s belief that the United Nations should not interfere in Congolese internal politics. Moreover, the general escalation of events spurred the Security Council to pass Resolution 169 on 24 November 1961, strongly deprecating the secessionist activities of Katanga and authorizing ONUC to use “the requisite measure of force” to remove foreign mercenaries and “to take all necessary measures to prevent the entry or return of such elements.”¹⁷

Meanwhile, the United States, fearful of Communist encroachment on the continent, was resolved in the Congo to keep the Soviet Union *out*, the United Nations *in*, and Belgian interference *down* in the former colony.¹⁸ The Americans also wanted to stop the country from falling apart, viewing secession of mineral-rich Katanga as a threat to the economic vitality of the new country. In the background, decolonization was one of the great movements of the era, and the United States was keen to show newly independent countries that it supported integral, viable new states. The disintegration of the Congo was a major concern, as was Soviet intervention. So international (UN) intervention in Katanga was deemed necessary, even if it meant intervention into the internal affairs of a new

16. The plane that Hammarskjöld flew in had been “shot up” by the Katangan Fouga Magister shortly before while it was leaving the Elisabethville airport but UN technicians had repaired the damage and considered the plane “air worthy” before Hammarskjöld’s departure. The plane crashed fifteen kilometres into its approach to Ndola airport. There are many theories and alleged conspiracies behind the crash. See Madeleine G. Kalb, *The Congo Cables: The Cold War in Africa—From Eisenhower to Kennedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 298. See also Lawrence R. Devlin, *Chief of Station, Congo: A Memoir of 1960-67* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), 167-68.

17. United Nations, Resolution Adopted by the Security Council at its 982nd Meeting on 24 November 1961, Document S/5002, 24 November 1961. See also United Nations, *The Blue Helmets*, 247.

18. This type of formulation is borrowed from Lord Hastings Ismay, the first North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Secretary-General, who described NATO’s purpose as: “to keep the Russians out; the Americans in; and the Germans down.” See David Reynolds, *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspective* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1994), 13.



Ethiopian Sabre jets arrive in the Congo. The UN force commander, Lt. Gen. Sean McKeown of Ireland (center), chats with Ethiopian officers. [Leopoldville, 3 October 1961, UN Photo #167826]

state (at the request of that state). Thus the United States, which had previously refused Hammarskjöld's requests to ferry UN troops within the Congo and had only brought troops to the Congo from abroad, now provided four transport planes without conditions. President Kennedy even offered to provide eight fighter jets if no other member nations were willing to do so.¹⁹ The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff suggested these jets could "seek out and destroy, either on the ground or in the air, the Fouga Magister jets."²⁰ However, U Thant sought to avoid direct superpower involvement in combat. Having promises of fighter jets from other nations, the United Nations turned down the American offer.²¹ Instead, the United States provided over twenty large transport planes to ferry reinforcements and anti-aircraft guns into Katanga.

Before his death, Hammarskjöld had managed to obtain from several UN member states promises of combat aircraft, which were desperately needed for the field mission. In October 1961, Sweden provided five J-29 Tunnan ("flying barrel") fighter jets, Ethiopia sent four F-86 Sabre jets, and India backed the mission with four Indian B(1)58 Canberra light bombers. These aircraft became what mission

19. Kalb, *Congo Cables*, 303.

20. Quoted in Kalb, *Congo Cables*, 303. Apparently, the Katangan authorities had managed to obtain other Fouga Magister jets by this time.

21. Besides, the United States did not want to be directly involved in combat, in part to avoid giving the Russians a stronger reason to deploy.

personnel dubbed the first “UN Air Force.”²² These aerial assets quickly joined the fray, attacking a military train east of Kolwezi, and the Katangan airfields at Jadotville and Kolwezi.²³ The United Nations created havoc among Katangan forces in much the same way that the armed Fouga Magister had done to the UN mission. Charanjit Singh, one of the pilots, described a UN attack on 8 December 1961 in graphic terms in his diary:

On instructions from ACT [Air Contact Team], attacked an army police camp 2 km NE of old runway [Elisabethville]. Some vehicles were parked outside what looked like a headquarters building. I fired a full burst on those and saw them going up in smoke and flames. As I pulled out of the dive, I saw hundreds of men running out in utter panic. As I flashed past them, I gathered an image of men running in all directions, some in undies, others in halfpants, some in uniforms. I saw some enter a billet. Attacked the HQ building and vehicles again. Saw a vehicle turn over. At the end of four attacks, the whole thing looked like the Tilpat (air-to-ground practice firing range near Delhi) show. I went back to my old target in Kasenga road. The rain had increased: and I could carry out only one attack with difficulty. The visibility was poor in that rain. I aimed at a truck camouflaged behind a building. When I pressed the trigger, only one bullet went off. It hit the bonnet of the vehicle and it caught fire. What a lucky strike it was because during the dive and till the vehicle was hit, there was a hot argument going on between me and Anand [Ft. Lt. R. P. Anand, the navigator]. He was insisting that I was attacking a bush. But I must admit, [the] camouflage was pretty good.²⁴

The net result of the UN buildup and its December 1961 offensive was that Katanga’s “air superiority” was temporarily ended.²⁵ The fate of the infamous jet trainer became an object of much speculation. UN pilots claimed to have destroyed it on the ground in an air attack on the Kolwezi airfield, but they actually hit a carefully crafted dummy. It was then believed that the Katangan Fouga had crashed while its

22. Memorandum, “Command and Control—Fighter Operations Group,” 13 October 1961, in DAG-13/1.6.5.8.3.0:1 6600/F-OPS Policy, October 1961–March 1963, United Nations Archives, New York.

23. Rikhye, *Military Adviser*, 294. Descriptions of the Kolwezi attack by Indian Air Forces officers are provided in Pushpinder Singh, “Canberras in the Congo,” Bharat Rakshak website, available at <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/History/1960s/Congo01.html>.

24. Charanjit Singh, “Congo Diary,” *Air Power Journal* 2, no. 3, MONSOON 2005 (July–September): 36, available at <http://www.aerospaceindia.org/Air%20Power%20Journals/Monsoon%202005/The%20Congo%20Diary.pdf>. The Air Contact Team controlled offensive air support missions in the battle zone. On 9 December 1961, ground forces put a bullet through the cockpit of Singh’s aircraft, missing his head by only a half-metre.

25. Annex A to MIL INFO 852, Leopoldville, 30 May 1962, Headquarters ONUC, “Katangese Air Capability, An Appreciation,” 6, paragraph 22 in S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

mercenary-pilot had parachuted to safety,²⁶ but this too was later found to be false. The Fougua mystery was to remain until much later (see below).

But even the UN's new aerial hardware was deemed insufficient for the robust mandate. The UN field mission pressed headquarters to obtain bombs for the Indian Canberra jets. "We need those bombs," Secretary-General U Thant would insist to the British government.²⁷ After weeks of stalling, the government of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan finally agreed on 7 December 1961 to supply twenty-four 1,000-pound bombs. But the offer came with the condition that they could be used only "against aircraft on the ground or [against] airstrips and airfields."²⁸ Even still, Macmillan worried that his government might fall over its handling of the Congo crisis, given the fierce support in some Conservative quarters for the anti-Communist Katanga regime.²⁹ In the end, the United States transported bombs directly from India.³⁰

Realizing what an enormous role a single Fougua jet had played in the success of Katangan operations in September 1961, Tshombé began purchasing new aircraft and hiring foreign mercenary pilots of various nationalities to fly them. Indeed, throughout 1962, UN Air Command desperately tried to monitor the Katangan aerial buildup through both aerial surveillance of Katangan airfields and intelligence gathered by ONUC's Military Information Branch (MIB).³¹ The need for aerial reconnaissance (recce) in identifying Tshombé's air assets became essential. On 23 January 1962 ONUC's Chief of Military Intelligence lamented:

ONUC has not been provided with any facilities for air photo reconnaissance. By using the Canberras' bombing equipment (their cameras are just meant to register the results of their own bombings) and some privately owned cameras from transport aircraft, we have tried to meet the most important photo recce demands. Obviously it can NOT be carried out as a normal function.³²

In an attempt to procure immediate intelligence on Katanga's air capability, a desperate ONUC on 9 March 1962 noted that aircrews from its military air units and from its charter companies were making "important observations during their flights and stops at various airfields in the Congo."³³ The mission began mandatory debriefings

26. Ibid.

27. Kalb, *Congo Cables*, 315.

28. Kalb, *Congo Cables*, 315, quoting from Harold Macmillan, *Pointing the Way* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 449.

29. Kalb, *Congo Cables*, 315. The opposition Labour Party wanted the bombs delivered right away, while the Conservative Party wanted the U.K. to stop supporting ONUC altogether.

30. "Bomb Supply on Way," *New York Times*, 2 January 1962, 2.

31. A. Walter Dorn and David J. H. Bell, "Intelligence in Peacekeeping: The UN Operation in the Congo 1960–64," *International Peacekeeping* 2, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 11–33.

32. Memorandum MIL INT 4/D/5, 23 January 1962, "Air Recce Results," paragraph 3 in S0829-3-11 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

33. Appendix 2 to Annex A, To MIL INT 121, 9 March 1962, "Debriefing of Aircrews," paragraphs 1–2, in S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

of aircrews after landing. The mission also sought to create an air reconnaissance unit capable of meeting both long-term reconnaissance and immediate operational requirements. One memo dated 10 March 1962 stated: "it becomes imperative that the air reconnaissance unit should be allotted with both C-47s and jet reconnaissance aircraft such as J-29s or photo-reconnaissance Canberras."³⁴ ONUC's Chief of Military Intelligence requested three C-47 aircraft "to check the Katangan air movements through systematic visual reconnaissance of their airfields."³⁵ On 6 June 1962 the ONUC Force Commander cabled Ralph Bunche, the Under-Secretary-General at UN headquarters responsible for peacekeeping operations, that "ONUC suffers from a grave lack of reconnaissance facilities. As a result even the photographs available may contain much more information which it is NOT possible to get because of inadequate facilities in equipment and personnel for interpretation."³⁶ In 1962, Sweden provided two J-29Cs, the photo reconnaissance versions of the J-29 jet aircraft, that proved of great worth.³⁷ The mission consequently added personnel designated as air intelligence officers.

At the same time, the threat of re-emerging Katangan aerial capabilities was real. ONUC concluded in May 1962:

[M]ercenaries, fighting for money and receiving higher salaries as FAK pilots than even Generals receive in UN service, are ruthless, cunning, non-conventional, clever and inventive. They have war experience, and they know where, when and how to hit . . . there is no alternative but to consider FAK as a dangerous enemy in the air.³⁸

ONUC had success uncovering the extent of Tshombé's aircraft acquisitions through intelligence gathered by the MIB. Defectors and informants interviewed revealed a wealth of information about Katangan aircraft both in Katanga and neighboring countries. Lieutenant-General Kebede Guebre (Ethiopia), the ONUC Force Commander, cabled Bunche at UN headquarters on 24 August 1962, referencing a report that Katangan-owned jet fighters were hidden in Angola and/or Rhodesia. Kebede requested Bunche to "check with Australia [about] the possibility of Australian trained jet [mercenary] pilots being available to Tshombe."³⁹ In another cable to Bunche dated 27 September, he stated that "a fully reliable source reported . . . that twelve Harvard aircraft have recently left

34. Memorandum, MIL INT 121, 10 March 1962 to Chief Fighter Operations Officer, "Air Reconnaissance," 1, paragraph 3 in S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

35. Memorandum, MIL INT 4/A/5, 16 March 1962 to Air Commander (through Chief of Staff), "Aerial Reconnaissance," in S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

36. MIL INFO 852, 6 June 1962, To Dr. Ralph Bunche, United Nations–New York, From Force Commander–ONUC, Leopoldville, "Katangese Air Capability," 1, paragraph 4, in S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

37. "J 29 Tunnan," available at <http://historywarsweapons.com/page/15>.

38. Annex A to MIL INFO 852, Leopoldville, 30 May 1962, Headquarters ONUC, "Katangese Air Capability, An Appreciation," 9, paragraph 32, in S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

39. Outgoing Code Cable to Dr. Bunche from General Kebede, 24 August 1962, No. ONUC 5838, paragraph 1, in S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.



Swedish Saab J-29 jet is offloaded from a US Air Force C-133 cargo plane. [Leopoldville, Congo, 23 October 1962, UN Photo #113781]

South Africa, bound for Katanga . . . equipped with guns and French rockets . . . [and that] an unspecified number of P-51 Mustangs may have left South Africa recently . . . intended for Katanga.”⁴⁰ Clearly, an aerial arms race had begun between the United Nations and the Katanga government with the former trying to persuade its member states to provide aircraft and the latter purchasing them clandestinely wherever possible. The United States, which had helped Katanga get its original Fouga Magister aircraft, was now working desperately to prevent the FAK expansion.

General Kebede again cabled Under-Secretary-General Bunche on 1 October 1962 comparing the air capabilities of the two protagonists. Katanga (FAK) was estimated to have acquired twelve Harvard single-propeller aircraft, eight or nine Fouga Magister trainer jets, four Vampire jet fighters, and a large number of P-51 Mustang single-propeller fighters (being delivered).⁴¹ The UN mission possessed six Canberra jet light bombers, four Saab J-29B fighter-bombers, and four Sabre F-86 jet fighters.⁴² At the time, the UN Air Division possessed no bombs—a

40. Outgoing Code Cable to Dr. Bunche from Gardiner, Leopoldville, 27 September 1962, No. G-1307, in S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

41. AEQ/6600/5/1/F.OPS (Classified “Secret”), 1 October 1962 to Dr. Bunche, UN HQ from Lt. General Kebede, Force Commander, ONUC, “Subject: Katangese Air Force (FAK) vis-à-vis UN Air Division,” 1, paragraph 3, in S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

42. To Dr. Bunche, UN HQ from Lt. General Kebede [Force Commander, ONUC], “Subject: Katangese Air Force (FAK) vis-à-vis UN Air Division,” 2, paragraph 6, in AEQ/6600/5/1/F.

serious deficiency, as it was considered the weapon needed to neutralize air bases and “enemy forces” on the ground.⁴³ Great Britain was dithering on UN pleas for bombs for its Canberra aircraft. ONUC concluded once again that air resources were inadequate to meet the FAK threat. Due to serviceability problems, only about 60 to 70 percent of ONUC aircraft would be available for operations, which would make it impossible to keep even a section of fighters on readiness and thus impossible to simultaneously defend even one airfield, conduct offensive sweeps, and escort transport aircraft. Moreover, since ONUC was entirely dependent on supplies delivered by air, of which 95 percent were lifted by civil chartered companies, a Katangan air threat would ground essential supply planes in the absence of UN fighter escorts.⁴⁴

In the same October 1962 report to Bunche, General Kebbede recommended immediate steps be taken to reinforce the UN Air Division. The first recommendation was for the acquisition of two J-29E photo-reconnaissance aircraft and a complete photo-interpretation unit to monitor developments and activities at Katangan air bases. The second was to increase the two UN fighter squadrons to eight fighters each (for a total of sixteen fighters). The third was the acquisition of two additional Canberra aircraft. Also recommended was the acquisition of anti-aircraft defences for UN air bases and radar for Elisabethville, as well as heavy calibre ammunition and napalm bombs for the Canberra bombers and additional communications equipment.⁴⁵ These recommendations were considered to be the bare minimum necessary for the operation.

Things became even worse when Ethiopia abruptly withdrew its Sabre aircraft after losing one in an accident. Furthermore, India experienced an urgent need to repatriate its Canberra bombers to fight in the new border war with China.⁴⁶ On the positive side, Sweden promised more Saab jets and Norway offered an anti-aircraft battery. New air surveillance radars were deployed at Kamina and Elisabethville.⁴⁷ When Canada responded negatively to UN requests for napalm bombs, other supplies were sought and found.⁴⁸

A few days following Kebbede’s requests, a cable from Robert Gardiner, the UN representative in the Congo, to Bunche reported that a South African aircraft company had offered Katanga forty Harvard aircraft, each equipped with forty rockets, for \$27,000 each. The planes were to be brought into Katanga through Angola, a Portuguese colony. Moreover, intelligence reported that the same company had previously sold seventeen aircraft to Katanga.⁴⁹ On 17 October,

OPS (Classified “Secret”), 1 October 1962, S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

43. *Ibid.*, 2–3, paragraph 7c.

44. *Ibid.*, 2–3, paragraph 7.

45. *Ibid.*, 3–4, paragraph 9.

46. Hellström, *Instant Air Force*, 23.

47. Dorn and Bell, “Intelligence in Peacekeeping,” 21.

48. Spooner, *Canada, the Congo Crisis and UN Peacekeeping*, 96.

49. Outgoing code cable, priority 743, to Dr. Bunche from Mr. Gardiner, 5 October 1962, No. G-1355, in S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

Gardiner cabled Bunche that aerial photography had confirmed the presence of six Harvard aircraft at Katanga's Kolwezi-Kengere airfield.⁵⁰

The UN mission was clamoring to increase its air force, particularly its fighter strength, despite UN Headquarters concerns about costs, having overcome earlier inhibitions on combat. Bunche cabled Kebede on 10 November to report on progress made in New York in trying to acquire more fighters for ONUC. Bunche wrote:

We are painfully aware of ONUC's fighter strength situation and are exerting every effort to correct it. We have urgently renewed our appeal to Sweden to provide four additional fighter aircraft and now have hopes that this appeal will be met. We have also made urgent approaches to Greece and the Philippines for fighter units . . . We were informed by the US mission yesterday that they have definite assurances that the Ethiopian aircraft will be returning. A purely exploratory approach has also been made to Italy. You may be sure that we will keep after this.⁵¹

Intelligence evidence mounted regarding the acquisition of new aircraft by Katanga. The growing strength of Katanga's air force relative to ONUC's had immediate military and strategic consequences. Congolese troops were constantly bombed and harassed by Katangan aircraft.⁵² The UN Commander's assessment was that:

Due to ONUC's limited strength of four fighters, we have to confine our action to Recce the area in question as often as possible during daylight and attack any Katangese aircraft flying in that area. We are *not* attempting to destroy any aircraft found in the airfield in the vicinity of that area because if we do locate one or two aircraft and destroy them, we feel that FAK will react against [our] Kamina Base and also disperse their aircraft from Kolwezi to other airfields, thereby making our task of locating and destroying these aircraft on the ground very difficult. Please advise dates by which additional four Swedish fighters, as promised, will be available and if any additional aircraft are expected from other nations.⁵³

The UN Commander's strategy was to wait until the new aircraft gave ONUC a fighter force capable of destroying the bulk of Katanga's air force on the ground in one overwhelming surprise assault. Another cable from Kebede to Bunche on the same day (24 November 1962) stated that "on request from the ANC, air recce missions over Kongolo area are being provided by UN fighters . . . Missions will be confined to recce and destroying any Katangese aircraft if found *flying*

50. Outgoing cable, secret, to Bunche from Gardiner, 17 October 1962, No. G-1438, 1, S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), in UN Archives.

51. Incoming code cable, priority, to Kebede, Leopoldville, from Bunche, New York, 10 November 1962, No. 7943, in S0829-1-13 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

52. Outgoing code cable, "most immediate," from General Kebede to Dr. Ralph Bunche, 24 November 1962, no. ONUC 7926, in S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

53. *Ibid.* (24 November 1962). Emphasis added.

over that area. Instructions have been issued NO repeat NO ground targets to be attacked.”⁵⁴ The ONUC Commander did not want to give the Katangans any reason to disperse or hide their aircraft but rather wanted them to feel safe and secure when on the ground at their major airfields.

Meanwhile, efforts in New York had gained traction. Sweden sent two Saab photo-recce aircraft in November 1962, greatly facilitating the gathering of air intelligence which permitted a revised estimate of Katanga’s air capability. Doubts about FAK’s endurance were reinforced because many of the aircraft appeared to be unserviceable, and stockpiles of ammunition as well as petroleum, oil, and lubricants could be found only at a few airfields. Furthermore, aerial photos showed that previous reports of underground shelter construction at some airfields were incorrect, and that underground shelters at the Kolewezi-Kengere airfield were vulnerable. Concerns about possible anti-aircraft batteries at some Katangan airfields were also shown to be misplaced.⁵⁵ This new appraisal of FAK’s capability coincided with the arrival of ONUC’s new fighters, and the bolstering of defences by a Norwegian anti-aircraft battery accompanied by 380 men.⁵⁶

The ONUC Commander’s “wait until ready” strategy was near the point of fruition. The “UN Air Force” was poised to strike jointly with UN ground troops under a plan for an operation appropriately named “Grand Slam.” However, a massive airlift capability was required to deploy the UN troops simultaneously. Though the United Nations by now had sixty-five transport aircraft, the largest were propeller-driven DC-4s and ONUC could not move its forces without major support from the U.S. Military Air Transport Service. The details of the UN requirements were passed to the U.S. Department of Defense by Major-General Indarjit Rikhye, Thant’s military adviser, now stationed in the Congo. A few days later, the United States responded that the United Nations could count on U.S. support.⁵⁷

The United States was again, as a year earlier, considering fighter support in addition to logistics and transport. In November, President Kennedy offered fighter planes without American pilots. Following that, the Pentagon went further, recommending a Composite Air Strike Unit to “destroy or neutralize” Katanga’s air capability.⁵⁸ But the Joint Chiefs recommended the “direct commitment of US forces” only under dire circumstances. Kennedy asked his UN Ambassador, Adlai Stevenson, to determine if the United Nations desired the U.S.-piloted jet planes. In a meeting on 16 December, Thant expressed confidence that the UN mission would be able to resolve the situation without the U.S. fighter jets. Thant wanted

54. Outgoing code cable, most immediate, to Dr. Ralph Bunche from General Kebbede, 24 November 1962, No. ONUC 7926, in S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives. Italics added.

55. Annex C, HQ ONUC, MIL INFO 741, 22 February 1963, “Report of Visit to Kolewezi and Jadotville Airfields 25–29 January 63,” 9, in S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

56. Kalb, *Congo Cables*, 360.

57. Rikhye, *Military Adviser*, 302.

58. Kalb, *Congo Cables*, 362.

to keep the veneer of UN impartiality, while trying to avoid a direct superpower clash in the Congo. He planned to enforce Security Council-mandated sanctions with forceful UN action from the air and on the ground. The Americans argued for an “overwhelming show of strength from the air.” Thant said that if the situation remained deadlocked in the spring of 1963, he would again consider the U.S. offer.⁵⁹ This was not necessary, however, since the final fight over Katanga began just a few days later.

On Christmas Eve 1962, Katangan gendarmes shot at a UN observation helicopter, fatally wounding an Indian crewmember and forcing the aircraft to land. The crew was seized and beaten.⁶⁰ Elsewhere, Katangan forces began firing continuously at UN positions, fatally wounding several soldiers. The United Nations sought a ceasefire, even escorting Tshombé himself to a point near the fighting. The Katangan leader had to agree that the firing was coming only from Katangan positions and the United Nations was not engaging in combat. After four days of ceasefire efforts, the UN commander in Elisabethville, Major-General Prem Chand of India, finally persuaded Thant to approve an offensive operation, designed to be decisive.⁶¹ The convincing argument came from radio intercepts that had revealed the Katangan commander had ordered his air force to bomb Elisabethville airport during the night of 29 December.⁶²

Equipped with air transports and the newly acquired jet fighters, the United Nations launched Operation Grand Slam. The mission's Air Division struck Katangan air assets with confidence, achieving the element of surprise. On 29 December 1962 at 0430 hours, ONUC's J-29 fighters attacked the Kolwezi-Kengere airfield. They relied entirely upon their 20-mm cannons since the cloud ceiling was too low to use their 13.5-mm rockets.⁶³ Three UN aircraft were hit by ground fire. One plane suffered two bullets through its canopy without, fortunately, hitting the pilot. The UN attacks continued throughout the day and expanded to other Katangan airfields. On that day seventeen fighter and three recon sorties were carried out by UN aircraft resulting in six Katangan aircraft destroyed on the ground and possibly one in the air. Five petrol dumps were set on fire at the Kolwezi (Kengere) airfield, where two hangars and the administrative building were also destroyed.⁶⁴ Active patrolling of the skies by the Swedish J-29s effectively cut the air bridge between Katanga and its allies in Portuguese East

59. *Ibid.*, 365.

60. Code Cable [Robert] Gardiner [Officer in Charge, ONUC] to Bunche, 24 December 1962, in S-0875-0006-06-00001, UN Archives.

61. Kalb, *Congo Cables*, 366–67.

62. Dorn and Bell, “Intelligence and UN Peacekeeping,” 20.

63. Appendix I, Annex C, HQ ONUC, MIL INFO 741, 22 February 1963, “Summary of Air Activity 28 December–4 January 63,” 1, in S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

64. Appendix I, Annex C, HQ ONUC, MIL INFO 741, 22 February 1963, “Summary of Air Activity 28 December–4 January 63,” 1–2, in S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.



Rockets for the J-29 Saab jets are uncrated and piled up in advance of deployment on the aircraft. [Elisabethville, 3 January 1963, UN Photo 72379]

Africa and Southern Africa, precluding the introduction of new aircraft.⁶⁵ From 28 December 1962 to 4 January 1963, a total of seventy-six sorties were carried out by UN aircraft against Katanga's airfields and aircraft.⁶⁶

As a result of these coordinated attacks, most of Tshombé's aircraft in Katanga were destroyed on the ground. The ONUC Commander's strategy had succeeded against very little resistance. One ONUC summary of the attacks concluded triumphantly that the "Katang[an] Air Force as such is no longer in existence." Out of the estimated dozen combat aircraft in the force (Harvards and Vampires), only one or possibly two Harvards were not confirmed destroyed. Moreover, all vital air installations at the Kolwezi airfield had been demolished. Evaluating the threat, the summary concluded confidently: "It is unlikely that any further offensive activity can be expected by Katangan aircraft in the near future. Should they, however, try to undertake any such action, the only [Katangan] course would be hit and run raids by individual aircraft from airfields outside KATANGA."⁶⁷ During Operation Grand Slam, seven UN fighter aircraft and one reconnaissance

65. Johnson, "Heart of Darkness: the Tragedy of the Congo," 11.

66. Appendix I, Annex C, HQ ONUC, MIL INFO 741, 22 February 1963, "Summary of Air Activity 28 December-4 January 63," 2, paragraph 7, in S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

67. *Ibid.*, 3. Capitalization in the original.

plane were hit by ground fire but no pilots were injured.⁶⁸ In addition to kinetic action against Katangan air assets, UN fighter aircraft also provided close air support to UN ground forces.⁶⁹ Though defeated militarily, Tshombé sought to cut deals, but the United Nations demanded that he surrender his remaining military strongholds, given that he had broken many agreements before. Tshombé finally capitulated on 15 January 1963, renouncing for good his secession.

An ONUC intelligence team subsequently learned that the Katangan air force still had some fifteen aircraft hidden in Angolan airfields,⁷⁰ which was later confirmed by Angolan authorities in a radio broadcast on 9 February 1963. According to Belgian mercenaries interrogated in Kolwezi by the UN intelligence team, these aircraft were placed there for use “in the next fight for Katanga’s secession.”⁷¹ Moreover, when the December hostilities had begun, the Katangan air buildup had still been underway and at least some of Katanga’s leaders had believed that they could seriously challenge the United Nations. This was expressed to the UN intelligence team in the following manner:

If you had only given us four more weeks so that we could have got the Mustangs ready, you would have experienced the same disastrous surprise one early morning at your Kamina Base as we experienced at Kengere [Kolwezi] on 29 December.⁷²

Clearly ONUC’s victory had come just in time; indeed, it may have been a very close call for the United Nations since the Mustang aircraft purchased by Tshombé were expected to arrive in Katanga in January 1963.⁷³ (That month the United Nations received additional Sabre jets from Italy, the Philippines, and Iran,⁷⁴ although these jets did not need to engage in combat.)

The United Nations confirmed that the Katangan air buildup in 1961–62 had been accomplished with the knowledge and assistance of the governments of Angola, South Africa, and Rhodesia. A UN study concluded: “the need for an efficient *air intelligence service* appears to have been confirmed even for a ‘peaceful’ operation such as that of the UN in the Congo.”⁷⁵

The experience of robust, kinetic airpower in the Congo had raised some ethical dilemmas that required tough decision-making by the UN Secretary-

68. U Thant, *View from the UN* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1978), 145.

69. Rikhye, *Military Adviser*, 310.

70. Annex C, HQ ONUC, MIL INFO 741, 22 February 1963, “Report of Visit to Kolwezi and Jadotville Airfields 25–29 January 1963,” 8, in S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*

73. *Ibid.*, 7.

74. Tim Cooper, “Congo, Part 1: 1960–63,” Air Combat Information Group, available at http://www.acig.org/artman/publish/article_182.shtml.

75. Annex C, HQ ONUC, MIL INFO 741, 22 February 1963, “Report of Visit to Kolwezi and Jadotville Airfields 25–29 January 1963,” 9, in S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives. *Italics added.*

General. The day before the surprise attack on the airfield, U Thant had cabled General Kebbede to forbid the use of napalm, which could be spread by both the Indian Canberras and Swedish Saab J-29s. Thant had stated: "We recognize that tactically napalm type bombs might have some special utility. But we are certain that the disadvantages, particularly as regards world opinion, outweigh the advantages. Therefore, it has been decided that they cannot be used."⁷⁶ This order came several years before the United States used napalm in Vietnam with such a negative impact on world opinion.

The minimization of UN and civilian fatalities was also extremely important for the United Nations. After the surprise attack, the United Nations could confirm that no UN personnel were killed or injured as a result of the air attacks on Kolwezi, Kamatanda, and Ngule airfields.⁷⁷ Likewise there were no confirmed reports of civilian casualties during Operation Grand Slam. Thus a potential media relations disaster for ONUC was avoided, while the mission was accomplished. However, the number of Katangans and mercenaries killed is not known.

After the battle, ONUC's intelligence organization (MIB) learned the fate of the original Fouga Magister that had attained such renown during the 1961 hostilities against ONUC. UN fighters did not destroy the Fouga, nor did it crash, as had been originally believed. The MIB pieced together the picture after the Katangan airfields had been secured by the United Nations:

The true story about this last Katangese Fouga is that it took off from Kolwezi-Kengere some few minutes prior to the first UN air attack . . . the Fouga eventually landed at a base outside Katanga where it remained the property of Tshombé pending an opportunity to again indulge in Katangese operations.⁷⁸

That opportunity never came.

Phase III: Endgame in the Congo

The successful defeat of the Katangan secession in January 1963 did not end ONUC's mission or the important role of UN air power. In January 1964, during the last phase of ONUC's deployment, a revolt began in Kwilu province. This, however, was not initially clear to ONUC, which no longer comprised a 20,000-strong force but was down to only about 5,500 personnel. Word reached Leopoldville that villages were burning and the ANC was in full retreat. Missionaries were emerging from the jungle pleading for ONUC assistance. An organized Congolese force called

76. Incoming Code Cable, Priority, to Kebbede Leopoldville, from Secretary-General New York, 28 December 1962, Number 9153, in S0829-1-13 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

77. Annex C, HQ ONUC, MIL INFO 741, 22 February 1963, "Report of Visit to Kolwezi and Jadotville Airfields 25-29 January 63," 8, in S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

78. Annex C, HQ ONUC, MIL INFO 741, 22 February 1963, "Report of Visit to Kolwezi and Jadotville Airfields 25-29 January 63," 7, in S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0), UN Archives.

the *jeunesse* (youth) seemed to be directly targeting them. The violence in Kwilu was followed by uprisings in Stanleyville and in other provinces. However, the bulk of ONUC forces were already occupied and there was inadequate air transport to deploy forces west to Kwilu in any case. As reports of atrocities against aid workers and missionaries mounted, ONUC's Chief of Staff, Canadian Brigadier-General Jacques Dextraze, put together a small force initially comprised of two ten-man sections under Canadian Lieutenant-Colonel P. A. Mayer, whose orders were to "rescue as many missionaries as possible who wish to be rescued."⁷⁹

With a single-propeller Otter aircraft and two-to-four old S-55 helicopters, the teams followed an operational concept in which the Otter flew recce flights while two of the helicopters carried the infantry sections and the other two helicopters offered fire support. Several rescue missions were carried out, saving more than a hundred people, often under fire. After several missions, a standard operating procedure emerged. The command and control plane (usually the Otter) would conduct a general recce, identify the mission site(s), and assess the threat. It would continue to orbit and maintain watch over the situation. A second aircraft, usually a helicopter or another Otter, would conduct a close recce identifying people on the ground and possible landing sites. The single-engine T6 (Harvard) fighters directed by the Otter would begin harassing the groups of *jeunesse* in the vicinity while the fire and support helicopter(s) would cover the transport helicopter that would directly come to the rescue.⁸⁰ An air unit created by the CIA would sometimes provide air cover for UN helicopters as well.⁸¹

Often these UN attempts were conducted with large groups of *jeunesse* in the area. In one such operation, General Dextraze escaped only by firing his sub-machine gun at the *jeunesse* to keep them off his helicopter.⁸² In another operation, Lieutenant-Colonel Mayer was assaulted by the *jeunesse*, one of whom grabbed his pistol, stuck it in his stomach, and pulled the trigger. Fortunately there was "no round up the spout."⁸³

Throughout March and April 1964 the operation was expanded to include a C-47 transport aircraft, additional T6 (Harvard) fighters, and a full ANC paracommando company.⁸⁴ By July, however, the UN mission was withdrawn entirely, in accordance with the decision of the Security Council in Resolution 199

79. UN Archives, ONUC files, DAG 13/1.6.5.0.0 #3, FC/Ops/3025, file Ops Directives August 1960–January 1964 (26 January 1964) "Operation JADDEX 1," as cited in Sean M. Maloney, "Mad Jimmy' Dextraze: The Tightrope of UN Command in the Congo," in *Warrior Chiefs: Perspectives on Senior Canadian Military Leaders*, ed. Lieutenant-Colonel Bernd Horn and Stephen Harris (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2001), 211.

80. Paul Mayer, "Peacekeeping in the Congo: The Operation at Liembe," *The Canadian Guardsman*, 1965, 136–41, as cited in Horn and Harris, *Warrior Chiefs*, 211.

81. Hellström, *Instant Air Force*, 39.

82. Maloney, "Mad Jimmy' Dextraze," 315.

83. *Ibid.*, 313.

84. UN Archives, DAG 13/1.6.5.2.0: 26 HQ Mil ops Operation "Stayput" 6 March 1964, as cited in Maloney, "Mad Jimmy' Dextraze," 316.

(1964).⁸⁵ The UN mission had played a difficult role in a chaotic Congo. It had strengthened the hand of the central government and kept the country together.

Some Lessons with Examples

The Congo mission in the early 1960s was a pioneering multidimensional mission that offered significant though forgotten lessons on the benefits and challenges of air power in various roles.

Aerial reconnaissance: strengths and weaknesses

While the importance of air recce was shown in the mission, the limitations were also illustrated. In a major example, a UN aircraft was sent on 13 November 1961 to observe the situation at the Kindu airport after radio communications had been lost. The pilot did not observe or report anything abnormal or alarming. On the ground, however, the situation was anything but normal. There was a stand-off at the airport, with rebel Congolese forces demanding possession of two Italian aircraft that had just flown in, as well as fourteen Ferret Scout cars of the Malaysian Special Force. The Congolese forces surrounded the airport and, over the next eight hours, the Malaysian forces dug into defensive positions. The Malaysians, for their part, demanded the return of the thirteen Italian airmen who had been seized by rebel Congolese forces. The rebel forces had erroneously mistaken the Italians for despised Belgian military personnel.

After three days, a lieutenant colonel from the UN Air Force arrived at the airport to determine the situation on the ground. The UN mission quickly reinforced its presence with two additional rifle companies and Canberra bombers flying overhead. It made plans for a ground and air attack on Congolese rebel forces in three locations. The Indian bombers made three sorties but did not need to engage. The Congolese rebels withdrew in the face of such military power. Unfortunately, it was too late for the Italian airmen who had been taken hostage. As reported by Belgian civilians, all thirteen airmen suffered a gruesome death.⁸⁶ This dire situation on the ground was not apparent in the quick recce fly-by on the first day. Apparently, the pilot saw the UN flags flying, the armored vehicles in good condition, and “deemed the situation on the ground normal!”⁸⁷

Another situation also illustrated the limitations of air observation. In 1962, a Swedish transport aircraft was shot down by gunmen in the bush.⁸⁸ To begin the

85. For a good description of the aftermath of the mission and the convoluted events after 1964, see Johnson, “Heart of Darkness: the Tragedy of the Congo.” As the UN was withdrawing from the Congo in 1963–64, the Swedes blew up half of their “time-expired J-29s on the runway at Kamina.” Apparently, one of the remaining J-29s is on display at the Swedish Air Force Museum.

86. The thirteen Italian airmen were shot dead. Some were then allegedly “butchered and sold as meat at the market in Kindu.” N. H. Siebel and Maurice Lam, “Congo Kindu Airport,” available at <http://www.thebluehelmets.ca/documents/Congo%20Kindu%20Airport.pdf>.

87. “2Lt N. H. Siebel PGB and Captain Maurice Lam PGB in the Congo” [author unspecified], available at www.thebluehelmets.ca/documents/Congo%20Kindu%20Airport.pdf.

88. The UN investigation by the Board of Inquiry is described in UN Document S/5053/Add.12 of 8 October 1962. The ONUC Dakota was engaged in reconnaissance operations when

search and rescue for survivors, the site of the crash was determined. A UN helicopter was to land close to the wreckage. An Indian Canberra, piloted by Squadron Leader Peter Wilson, provided cover for this operation. He reconnoitered the area and detected no hostile elements in the bush, and so radioed the “all clear” message. As the helicopter was landing, however, an estimated fifty people broke from cover and ran towards it. Wilson saw white Europeans in front but behind were Africans who were either following or chasing. The Indian Air Force website describes what happened:

Wilson did not want to fire, as it was not clear if the Africans were hostile, and they were anyway too close to the Swedes; but to warn them off he made several low passes over them; low enough so that they threw themselves to the ground as he passed over. The helicopter pilot called Wilson on the R/T, “IAF Canberra please stop, you are frightening these people!” The Africans turned out to be friendly local Congolese, who had helped and looked after the Swedish survivors, rather than hostile Katangan rebels.⁸⁹

Air combat: the risks of using force

Prior to ONUC, all UN peacekeeping missions were either unarmed or used force only in self-defence. Though the Council did not explicitly invoke the UN Charter’s Chapter VII (Enforcement) in the Congo, ONUC was the first UN peacekeeping operation to put into effect a Security Council call for all “necessary” measures. The mission found itself in a de facto with Katanga. ONUC’s Rules of Engagement (ROEs) were frequently amended due to changes in the circumstances in the Congo and in ONUC’s mission. Indeed, ONUC’s ROE were affected not only by the three successive Security Council resolutions but also by at least ten different operational directives, as described by the academic Trevor Findlay.⁹⁰ Addressing the specifics and impact of each of these transitions is beyond the scope of this paper. However, some points merit attention both in general terms and due to their relevance to the use of airpower by a UN mission.

In ONUC’s early stages Secretary-General Hammarskjöld refused to interfere in Congolese internal politics and saw ONUC’s mission only in terms of restoring order and promoting stability. He would not take sides in the issue of Katanga’s secession and refused to authorize military force to prevent it, denying the mission’s early demands for air combat power. Even after Security Council Resolution 161 of 21 February 1961 authorized the UN operation to take “all appropriate measures

it was shot down near Kabongo. After evacuating the burning aircraft and extracting a dead colleague, the crew came under fire from ANC troops nearby who thought the flyers were from the Katangan forces, but when they realized the crew were UN personnel they provided full cooperation.

89. K. Sree Kumar, “Encounters with Veterans: Air Commodore P M Wilson,” Indian Air Force Veteran Histories, available at <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/History/1960s/Wilson01.html>.

90. Trevor Findlay, *The Use of Force in UN Peace Operations* (Solna: SIPRI and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

to prevent the occurrence of civil war in the Congo, including . . . the use of force, if necessary, in the last resort,” Hammarskjöld’s instructions to ONUC of September 1961 included numerous limitations on the use of military measures.⁹¹

Several of Hammarskjöld’s qualifications were subsequently ignored and even broken by the Special Representative in Katanga, Conor Cruise O’Brien, especially in the launching of Operation Morthor in September 1961. This operation began without Hammarskjöld’s authorization. As Findlay put it: “It involved significant use of force, caused hundreds of casualties, and exponentially increased the dissent that had plagued the UN operation in the Congo from its inception.”⁹² However, it did not involve the use of UN air power for combat. Though Hammarskjöld cancelled the continuation of Morthor, he sought promises from several UN member states to provide aircraft for “defensive” purposes, notably against Katanga’s air assets, which had wreaked havoc on UN forces during the operation. After Hammarskjöld’s death, Secretary-General U Thant was more ready to use force. Though a Buddhist pacifist in personal theology,⁹³ Thant believed that ONUC’s mandate to prevent civil war implied armed force, including combat air power, to suppress armed and secessionist activities.

The arrival of aircraft from Sweden, Ethiopia, and India led to the creation of ONUC’s air wing, which required explicit direction. Thant authorized ONUC to protect UN troops from Katangan actions that endangered the lives of peacekeepers, including Katangan efforts of “actually attacking them or by moving directly against them with hostile intent.”⁹⁴ November 1961 marked the first time the United Nations issued ROEs for the use of combat air power. The instruction to engage in pre-emptive defensive action in the case of hostile intent added a new dimension to traditional self-defence rules of ground forces in peacekeeping operations. Subsequently, more detailed instructions on ONUC’s use of airpower were promulgated, placing strong command and control limitations:

The UN jet Air Force will not be used in a supporting role without the authority of the Air Commodore under instructions from Dr. Linnér [Special Representatives of the Secretary-General] and the Force Commander . . . The possible use of this Air Force will not be conveyed

91. *Ibid.*, 74.

92. *Ibid.*, 75.

93. A. Walter Dorn, “U Thant: Buddhism in Action,” in *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership*, ed. Kent Kille (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 143–86. Available at www.walterdorn.org/pdf/UThant-BuddhismInAction_Dorn_SG-MoralAuthority_2007.pdf.

94. Outgoing Code Cable, no. 8155, 20 November 1961, from the Acting Secretary-General to Linner, Yacob, Leopoldville, in DAG1/2.2.1, #10, UN Archives. The usual caveats were attached. Such action was only to be taken as a last resort and limited to those measures clearly necessary to the defence of ONUC troops and other personnel. No action was to be ordered without prior warning in ample time to the authorities concerned and due care was to be taken to avoid casualties among “non-involved civilians”; cited in Trevor Findlay, *The Blue Helmets’ First War? Use of Force by the UN in the Congo 1960–64* (Clementsport, NS: Canadian Peacekeeping Press, 1999), 116.

to the ANC in the form of a threat or otherwise except on authority from Dr. Linnér and the Force Commander . . . [aerial action] is to be taken as a last resort and should be limited to those measures clearly necessary to the defense of ONUC troops and other personnel. No action of this kind is to be ordered, however, without prior warning in ample time, to the authorities concerned. Due care should be exercised to avoid casualties among non-involved civilians.⁹⁵

On 5 December 1961, with the launching of the UN's military operation, Thant authorized "all counter-action—ground and aerial—deemed necessary to restore complete freedom of movement in the area."⁹⁶ Leaflets were dropped by air, telling the Katangans that the United Nations was a force of peace. The two-way air war commenced 5 December 1961 with the Katangan bombing of Elisabethville airfield. The next day, ONUC's first airstrike occurred when Indian Canberra bombers attacked the Kolwezi airstrip. The Jadotville airstrip and other Katangan installations were also attacked and by 8 December, ONUC commanded the skies over Katanga.

There followed a year-long shaky truce during which time Tshombé steadily built a new and highly credible air force. In March 1962, during the buildup, Thant explained why the United Nations could not use force to end Katanga's secession: "The UN has been authorized to use force only in three situations: one, to prevent civil war; two, to arrest foreign mercenaries; and three, to retaliate when attacked."⁹⁷

By October 1962, ONUC was again suffering from direct attacks by Katanga's aircraft, as were the central government's troops, civilians, and communications across the border in Kasai. As such aggression was tantamount to civil war, violating the 21 February 1961 Council resolution, ONUC ordered Katanga to ground all military aircraft and declared it would shoot down aircraft engaged in offensive operations.⁹⁸ This was, in effect, a UN-mandated no-fly zone.

The escalation of events in December 1962, including the shooting down of an Indian helicopter, led to UN warnings to Tshombé that unless firing against UN forces ceased, the mission would take "all necessary action in self-defense and to restore order."⁹⁹ Tshombé's refusals to order his troops to stop firing, and radio intercepts that revealed that the Katangan commander had ordered his air force

95. Fighter Operations Order No. 6, AHQ/66PP/1/F-OPS, undated, DAG13/1.6.5.0.0, #7, UN Archives, New York, cited in Findlay, *The Blue Helmets' First War?*, 117.

96. Findlay, *The Blue Helmets' First War?*, 118.

97. UN Press Services, Note No. 2548, "Note to Correspondents: Press Conference by the Acting Secretary-General at UN Headquarters on Tuesday, 27 March 1962"; also cited in Findlay, *The Blue Helmets' First War?*, 124.

98. Findlay, *The Blue Helmets' First War?*, 127, referring to *Yearbook of the United Nations: Special Edition*, UN Fiftieth Anniversary 1945–1995, 39.

99. E. W. Lefever and W. Joshua, *United Nations Peacekeeping in the Congo, 1960–1964: An Analysis of Political, Executive, and Military Control*, 1–4 (Washington: Brookings Institution for the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency [ACDA], 30 June, 1966), 2, 108, as cited in Findlay, *The Use of Force in UN Peace Operations*, 129.

to bomb the Elisabethville airport during the night of 29 December, compelled Thant to acquiesce to requests from Special Representative Gardiner and Force Commander Prem Chand to commence military operations. On 27 December 1962 the UN air wing was issued Fighter Operations Order 16 to retaliate against (that is, “shoot down”) any Katangan aircraft that attacks “any target, whether belonging to UN or NOT.” Furthermore, any Katanga aircraft “carrying visible offensive weapons, such as bombs or rockets,” should be shot down.¹⁰⁰ This strong aerial ROE could only be justified by the extreme circumstances that existed in late December 1962, as the fighting had started in earnest and continued for days. The success of the United Nations in destroying the Katangan air assets came at the conclusion of the preceding series of ROEs.

There were objections to the escalation of force, both among UN diplomats and service members on the ground. In 1961, Swedish pilots refused some requests for close air support to ground troops, reasoning that the risk of civilian casualties was too high. In November 1962, the Swedish air commander refused a direct order to shoot down Katangan aircraft. The UN Air Commander (an Indian) resigned in complaint and the American air attaché in New York lamented that concerted efforts by UN headquarters “can be nullified by the actions of one officer.”¹⁰¹ Nevertheless the decision was supported by the Swedish government, which wanted its aircraft to be used for purely defensive purposes only. This shows how national caveats can be as troublesome for UN missions as they are for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and other multinational missions, even a half-century later in Afghanistan. Furthermore, finding the balance between defence and offense is difficult in any military mission, including those of the United Nations.

Conclusion

ONUC was a pioneering mission. It was the first UN mission to operate together with government forces against rebels and mercenaries, and the first mission to implement a “no fly-zone” and an arms embargo—including by detaining aircraft and crews that were bringing arms and military supplies into the Congo. Most significantly, it was the first peacekeeping mission to use combat to carry out the decisions of the Security Council. Air power played a large role in its application of the operational mandate. Coordinated air-to-ground attacks were used for the first time in the history of peacekeeping (and one of the few times until the twenty-first century). Had ONUC’s air contingent failed to destroy Katanga’s considerable air assets at the outset of Operation Grand Slam, Katanga’s air superiority would have made it impossible for the United Nations to resupply its ground troops, and ONUC would likely have failed in its mission. Many of the UN forces might even have been cut off and forced to surrender en masse, as the

100. ONUC LEO (ONUC Headquarters Leopoldville), “Fighter OPS ORDER NO 16,” 27 December 1962, AHQ/6600/1/F-OPS, UN Archives DAG13/1.6.5.0.0, #9 (series 0787), paragraph 4, also cited in Findlay, *The Blue Helmets’ First War?*, 130.

101. Hellström, *Instant Air Force*, 24, citing the John F. Kennedy presidential archives.

UN's Irish troops had been forced to do a year earlier. In that instance, Katanga's single Fouga jet had prevented their resupply and reinforcement.

The aim of this paper has been to examine the role of kinetic air power in ONUC, a forerunner of modern multidimensional missions, and to draw some lessons from this experience. It was demonstrated that initially air transport, mostly provided by the United States,¹⁰² was crucial in rapidly bringing troops to the Congo, and later to transport them to Katanga. Because of the absence of an air fighter contingent early in the mission, the whole endeavour was jeopardized. Just prior to his death, Secretary-General Hammarskjöld procured fighter aircraft—including from his native Sweden—as a deterrent to Katanga. One of the last acts of his legacy, as a result, was to create the “UN's first Air Force.” When air operations began against Katangan forces, detailed surveillance from the air was key, especially of Katanga's airfields. What enabled the UN Air Force to prevail was a viable air strategy. Notably the ONUC Commander ordered his forces to forgo attacks on Katanga's airfields, thus giving the Katangans a false sense of security, until such time as the United Nations had adequate air assets to destroy almost all Katanga's planes on the ground in an overwhelming surprise assault.

This mission also demonstrated that air power, while enabling the United Nations to project force at a relatively safe distance, can be quite politically sensitive in ways that force on the ground is not. Air power in the Congo had a strong offensive element, rather than the usual self-defence-only rules provided to peacekeepers. Thant's decision to forbid the use of napalm not only resulted in less bloodshed, but likely averted a public relations disaster for the United Nations. By this time, ONUC had already attracted enormous criticism from member states and from the international media for its decision to side with the Congolese central government. Had the United Nations used napalm, the world might have viewed pictures of burn casualties from a UN-perpetrated atrocity. Thant wisely averted this when his military commanders could not foresee it.

Sadly, while air power played a crucial role in this UN operation, it was not without drawbacks and collateral damage. UN aircraft allegedly bombed a hospital at Shinkolobwe, northwest of Elisabethville,¹⁰³ and the Lido Hotel in Elisabethville.¹⁰⁴ It narrowly missed a building where, unbeknownst to the UN pilots, 150 to 200 European women and children had taken shelter. “It was only due to poor aiming that the bombs did not hit the building” containing the

102. The U.S. Air Force flew 2,310 missions, moving 63,884 personnel and 37,202 tons of material from thirty-three countries during three and a half years of service. See Captain Gilles K. Van Nederveen, “USAF Airlift into the Heart of Darkness, the Congo 1960–1978: Implications for Modern Air Mobility Planners,” Research Paper 2001-04, Air University, Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama, September 2001.

103. *Solidarity and Defense: Sweden's Armed Forces in International Peacekeeping Operations during the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. Lars Ericson (Stockholm: Svenska Militärhistoriska Kommissioner/Swedish Military History Commission, 1995), 76, as cited in Findlay, *The Blue Helmets' First War?* 155.

104. “Four UN Jets Bomb Elisabethville Hotel,” *New York Times*, 14 December 1961.

civilians, wrote the Canadian Consul General in Leopoldville. He also wrote that two Canberra aircraft were on their way to bomb Tshombé's residence before Air Commander H. A. Morisson (from Canada) in Leopoldville managed to stop the attack.¹⁰⁵ Despite these close calls, far more collateral damage was done by ONUC's ground troops, including the alleged striking of a Katangan hospital by mortar fire.¹⁰⁶

The Congo mission highlighted many organizational difficulties for the United Nations. As a mission of unprecedented complexity, cobbled together in a rush, it experienced difficulties with command and control, intelligence (at least initially), and the application of force. When the United Nations returned to the Congo four decades later, it faced many of the same problems. But by the time the UN Mission in the Congo (MONUC) was created in 1999, the lessons of ONUC had been forgotten and the UN's historical knowledge buried in its archives. The lessons and historical actions need to be explored, described, and revealed, especially as the United Nations re-engages in robust peacekeeping in that central African nation. The modern mission employs attack helicopters, though no fighter jets or bombers, to deal with the Congo's "wild East," especially the Kivu provinces bordering Rwanda and Uganda. Fortunately, the southern province of Katanga is relatively peaceful and has been integrated into a united Congo, thanks in part to the robust actions of UN peacekeepers in the 1960s.

105. Canadian Consulate General Leopoldville to Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs Ottawa, "Conduct of UN Troops During December Fighting in Elisabethville," Cable of 16 January 1962, Library and Archives Canada, RG25, vol. 5224, file 6386-C-40, part 18, copy kindly provided by Kevin Spooner and referenced in Spooner, *Canada, the Congo Crisis and UN Peacekeeping*, 179.

106. Dennis Neeld, "UN Bombs Katanga Positions After Night of Heavy Action," *Washington Post*, 15 December 1961.