

Chapter 2

Peacekeepers in Combat: Fighter Jets and Bombers in the Congo, 1961–1963

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The United Nations Operation in the Congo (ONUC) was the largest, most complex, and most expensive UN peacekeeping mission of the Cold War. It was also the most robust operation, utilizing air power in an unprecedented and, in fact, unrepeatable fashion among UN peace operations. It was, for example, the only UN peace operation to date to utilize bomber aircraft.¹

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. ONUC's military operations were first devoted to quelling the uprising of the riotous Congolese National Army (Armée Nationale Congolaise (ANC)). UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld did not at first allow ONUC to interfere in the internal and complex issue of the secession of the Katanga province. 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, effectively siding with the Congolese central government to halt Katanga's secession. This effort then involved a myriad political and military Cold War intrigues, major US support, a murdered prime minister, and an operational mandate more forceful than had ever been put in place in UN peacekeeping. Katanga's resistance, especially in the air, necessitated the creation of the first "UN Air Force".² There followed the unique story of an aerial arms race.

1 In the Korean War, the "UN Command" utilized numerous combat aircraft but this was 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 US command with minimal direction from New York.

2 The United Nations had used aircraft in previous peace missions, but not for combat. In the UN's unarmed observer missions and its first peacekeeping force, it benefited from "dual use" aircraft for transport and reconnaissance. For instance, the United Nations Emergency Force (UNEF) deployed a few helicopters, DC-3 and Otter aircraft, later replaced by Caribou light cargo aircraft. By 1965, two light aircraft were deemed sufficient for air observation. Source: UN Doc. A/C.5/1049, "Survey of UNEF: Report of the Secretary General", 13 December 1965, quoted in Higgins, R. *United Nations Peacekeeping, 1946–1962: Documents and Commentary*, 1, *The Middle-East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 317.

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 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 beat and kill many Belgians who had remained in the Congo, as well as their fellow Congolese.³

During this phase of the operation, the United States provided strategic airlifts to transport an unprecedented number of UN troops into the Congo. The US Military Air Transport Service, using about 50 C-124s, moved 9,000 UN troops, in about two weeks,⁴ 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.⁵

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 – for a firsthand account from the individual responsible for UN air operations during this period of ONUC's operations see Chapter 1 in this volume. ONUC units succeeded in disarming many of the rebellious ANC troops,⁶ which helped restore a degree of law and order. At this early juncture, ONUC's mandate forbade it from interfering 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 Patrice Lumumba's demands that ONUC enter Katanga, subdue that province's rebel forces, and compel Katanga's leaders to submit to the Congo's central government. On 9 August 1960 Security Council Resolution 146 mentioned Katanga for the first

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

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

5 To head the air logistics, the United Nations appointed Canadian Group Captain Bill Carr, later chief of the Canadian Forces Air Command. See Rikhye, *Military Adviser to the Secretary-General*, 97; see also Carr, W.K. "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(1) (Spring, 2005), 4–11, 31; Chapter 1 in this volume.

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

time, allowing UN forces to enter Katanga, but not to “intervene in or influence the outcome of any internal conflict”.⁷ Further complicating matters, the Congolese leadership fell into disarray. Joseph Kasavubu 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

The second phase commenced with Security Council authorization to take “all appropriate measures” to prevent the occurrence of civil war in the Congo, including “the use of force, if necessary, in the last resort”.⁸ This resolution was used to justify UN military operations to end the Katangan secession. Ironically, Prime Minister Lumumba’s death triggered the fulfillment of his demands 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 materiel to suppress the secession. These developments combined to mobilize Western powers 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. Also Tshombé controlled Katanga’s gendarmerie and a large cadre of mercenaries. The resolve of his secessionists hardened after some 1,500 of the central government’s troops reached north Katanga in January 1961. 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 north Katanga.⁹ After Manono, the situation deteriorated rapidly and negotiations broke down.

On 28 August 1961, the United Nations launched Operation Rumpunch to arrest and deport mercenaries in Katanga. Then, in September, the Indian-led UN forces in Katanga launched Operation Morthor (“morthor” is the Hindi word for “smash”), to further round up foreign mercenaries and political advisers and to arrest Katangese officials. The “arrest” operation, which violated Hammarskjöld’s explicit 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 Aviation Katangaise (Avikat), also known as Force Aérienne Katangaise (FAK), held air superiority, though it consisted of only three Fouga Magister jet trainers.

7 Ibid, 225.

8 UN Security Council Resolution 161 of 21 February 1961.

9 Rikhye, *Military Adviser to the Secretary-General*, 182.

Remarkably, these aircraft were brought to Katanga in February aboard a Boeing Stratocruiser by the Seven Seas Charter Company, later identified as a US 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 US government could stop it.¹⁰

In any case, the KAF 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 Katangan 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 a Belgian mercenary from the Kolwezi airfield, also strafed UN positions, including the UN Headquarters in Katanga, and helped isolate a company of Irish troops who were forced to surrender to Katangan forces. Furthermore, the Fouga jet destroyed several UN-chartered aircraft at Katangan airports, including Elisabethville, the Katangan capital.¹¹ A US State Department official, Wayne Fredericks, 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".¹²

10 "UN Grounds 6 Planes; Report Says Congo Charter Carrier Aided Katanga", *New York Times*, 22 February 1961, 2. The CIA connection is described in Mahoney, R.D. *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 Spooner, K. *Canada, the Congo Crisis and UN Peacekeeping, 1960–64* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009), 249 n.8. In late 1962, when the US was solidly against the secession of the Katanga province, the CIA put together an air combat unit to fight the Katangese, with pilots from Cuba (anti-Castro exiles), but it did not engage in combat in the Congo until 1964 during the Mulele revolt. See Hellström, L. *The Instant Air Force: The Creation of the CIA Air Unit in the Congo, 1962* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2008), 34, 39.

11 Johnson, R.C. "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> [accessed 7 May 2014]. 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 Weissman, S.R. *American Foreign Policy in the Congo* (London: Cornell University Press, 1974), 183.

12 Quoted in Klevberg, H. "Logistical and Combat Air Power in ONUC", in Carsten F. Ronnfeldt and Per Erik Solli, eds, *Use of Air Power in Peace Operations* (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 1997), 36–7.

Deadlock prevailed throughout 1961, and the indecisive outcome of the UN's August and September 1961 ground initiatives in Katanga (Operations Rumpunch and Morthor) spurred Hammarskjöld to try to negotiate a ceasefire 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" Fougua Magister. The Katangan jet had shot bullets into UN aircraft only days before. And Hammarskjöld's aircraft had been damaged by ground fire but was quickly repaired before take-off. 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.¹³

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".¹⁴

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.¹⁵ 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. Therefore, international (United Nations) intervention

13 The plane crashed 15 km/9 mi into its approach to Ndola airport. There are many theories and alleged conspiracies behind the crash. See Kalb, M.G. *The Congo Cables: The Cold War in Africa – From Eisenhower to Kennedy* (New York: Macmillan, 1982), 298. See also Devlin, L.R. *Chief of Station, Congo: A Memoir of 1960–67* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), 167–8.

14 United Nations, "Resolution [169] Adopted by the Security Council at its 982nd Meeting on 24 November 1961", Document S/5002, 24 November 1961. See also Findlay, T.C. *The Blue Helmets' First War? Use of Force by the UN in the Congo, 1960–64* (Canadian Peacekeeping Press, 1999), 247.

15 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 Reynolds, D. *The Origins of the Cold War in Europe: International Perspective* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 13.

in Katanga was deemed necessary, even if it meant intervention into the internal affairs of a new state (although at the request of that state). Thus the United States, which had previously refused Hammarskjöld's requests to ferry 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.¹⁶ The US Joint Chiefs of Staff suggested these jets could "seek out and destroy, either on the ground or in the air, the Fouga Magister jets".¹⁷ However, Thant sought to avoid direct superpower involvement in combat. Having promises of fighter jets from other nations, the American offer was turned down.¹⁸ Instead, the United States provided over 20 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 ("The Flying Barrel") fighter jets – one of which is shown in Figure 2.1. Ethiopia sent four F-86 Sabre jets, and India backed the mission with four Indian B(I)58 Canberra light bombers. These aircraft became what mission personnel dubbed the first "UN Air Force".¹⁹

The UN's aerial assets soon joined the fray. In December, they attacked a military train east of Kolwezi and Katangan airfields at Jadotville and Kolwezi.²⁰ The United Nations created havoc among Katangan forces in much the same way that the armed Fouga Magister had earlier done to the UN mission. Charanjit Singh, one of the Indian UN pilots, described his attack on a Katangan camp in Elisabethville on 8 December 1961 in a cavalier fashion:

... attacked an army police camp 2 km NE of old runway. 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

16 Kalb, *The Congo Cables*, 303.

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

18 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.

19 Memorandum, "Command and Control – Fighter Operations Group", 13 October 1961, in UN Archives, New York, DAG-13/1.6.5.8.3.0:1 6600/F-OPS Policy. October 1961–March 1963.

20 Rikhye, *Military Adviser to the Secretary-General*, 294. Descriptions of the Kolwezi attack by Indian Air Force officers are provided in Singh, P. "Canberras in the Congo", Bharat Rakshak website. Available at: <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/IAF/History/1960s/Congo01.html> [accessed 7 May 2014].



Figure 2.1 **Rockets are uncrated before being deployed on Saab J-29 jets**
Source: UN Photo 72379.

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.²¹

The net result of the UN buildup and its December 1961 offensive was that Katanga's "air superiority" was temporarily ended.²² The fate of the infamous jet trainer became an object of much speculation. The 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 South African mercenary pilot had parachuted to safety,²³ but this too was found to be false.

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.²⁴ After weeks of stalling, the government of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan finally agreed on 7 December 1961 to supply 24 1,000-lb bombs. But the offer came with the condition that they could only be used "against aircraft on the ground or [against] airstrips and airfields".²⁵ 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.²⁶ In the end, the United States transported bombs directly from India.²⁷

Realizing what an enormous role a single Fouga 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).²⁸ In an

21 Singh, C. "Congo Diary", *Air Power Journal*, 2, no. 3, 2005 (July–September), 36. Available at: <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=119942> [accessed 6 May 2014]. The Air Contact Team controls 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 .5 m.

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

23 Ibid.

24 Kalb, *The Congo Cables*, 315.

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

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

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

28 Dorn, A.W. and Bell, D.J.H. "Intelligence in Peacekeeping: The UN Operation in the Congo 1960–64", *International Peacekeeping*, 2(1) (Spring, 1995), 11–33.

attempt to procure immediate intelligence on Katanga's air capability, a desperate ONUC on 9 March 1962 noted that aircrews from UN military air units and from its charter companies were making "important observations during their flights and stops at various airfields in the Congo".²⁹ The mission began mandatory debriefings 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 recce unit should be allotted with both C-47s and jet recce aircraft such as S-29s or photo-recce Canberras".³⁰ ONUC's Chief of Military Intelligence requested three C-47 aircraft "to check the Katangan air movements through systematic visual reconnaissance of their airfields".³¹ 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.³²

In 1962, Sweden provided two J-29Cs, the photo-reconnaissance versions of the J-29 jet aircraft that proved of great worth.³³ 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.³⁴

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

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

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

32 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 UN Archives, New York, S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0).

33 "J 29 Tunnan", see <http://historywarsweapons.com/page/15>

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

ONUC had success uncovering the extent of Tshombé's aircraft acquisitions through intelligence gathered by the MIB. Defectors and informants interviewed by the MIB revealed a wealth of information about Katangan aircraft both in Katanga and neighbouring countries. Lieutenant-General Kebbede Guebre (Ethiopia), the ONUC Force Commander, cabled Bunche at UN Headquarters on 24 August 1962, referencing a report that Katanga-owned jet fighters were hidden in Angola and/or Rhodesia. Kebbede requested Bunche to "check with Australia [about] the possibility of Australian trained jet [mercenary] pilots being available to Tshombe".³⁵ In another cable to Bunche dated 27 September 1962, he stated that:

a fully reliable source reported ... that twelve Harvard aircraft have recently left 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.³⁶

Clearly, the United Nations perceived itself in an aerial arms race with the Katanga government. It was trying to persuade its member states to provide aircraft while the Katanga government was purchasing them clandestinely wherever possible.

General Kebbede again cabled Under-Secretary-General Bunche on 1 October 1962, comparing the air capabilities of the two protagonists. Katanga (FAK) was now estimated to have 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).³⁷ The UN mission possessed six Canberra jet fighter-bombers, four Saab J-29B fighter-bombers, and four Sabre F-86 jet fighters.³⁸ At the time, the UN Air Division possessed no bombs – a serious deficiency, as it was considered the weapon needed to neutralize air bases and enemy forces on the ground.³⁹ Great Britain was still 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,

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

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

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

38 To Dr Bunche, UN HQ from Lt General Kebbede [Force Commander, ONUC], "Subject: Katangese Air Force (FAK) vis-à-vis UN Air Division", 2, paragraph 6, in AEQ/6600/5/1/F.OPS (Classified "Secret"), 1 October 1962, UN Archives, New York, S0829-1-14 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0).

39 Ibid, 2–3, paragraph 7c.

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.⁴⁰

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 S-29E photo-reconnaissance aircraft and a complete photo-interpretation unit to monitor developments and activities at Katangan air bases. The second was to increase two UN fighter squadrons to eight fighters each (for a total of 16 fighters). The third was the addition 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 and napalm bombs for the Canberra bombers and additional communications equipment.⁴¹ 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 a border war with China.⁴² 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.⁴³

A few days following Kebbede's UN requests, a cable from Robert Gardiner, the UN representative in the Congo, to Bunche reported that a South African aircraft company had offered Katanga 40 Harvard aircraft, each equipped with 40 rockets, for US\$27,000 each. The planes were thought to be transported into Katanga through Angola, a Portuguese colony. Moreover, intelligence reported that the same company had previously sold 17 aircraft to Katanga.⁴⁴ On 17 October, Gardiner cabled Bunche that aerial photography had confirmed the presence of six Harvard aircraft at Katanga's Kolwezi-Kengere airfield.⁴⁵

The UN mission was clamouring to increase its air force, particularly its fighter strength, despite UN Headquarters' concerns about costs, having overcome earlier inhibitions on combat. Intelligence evidence mounted regarding the acquisition of new aircraft by Katanga. The growing strength of Katanga's air force relative

40 Ibid, 2–3, paragraph 7.

41 Ibid, 3–4, paragraph 9.

42 Hellström, *The Instant Air Force*, 23.

43 Dorn and Bell, "Intelligence in Peacekeeping", 21.

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

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

to ONUC's had immediate military and strategic consequences. The ANC were frequently bombed and harassed by Katangan aircraft.⁴⁶ 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 expected from other nations.⁴⁷

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 attack. Another cable from Kebbede 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* over that area. Instructions have been issued NO repeat NO ground targets to be attacked.⁴⁸

The ONUC Commander did not want to give the Katangese any reason to disperse or hide their aircraft but rather wanted them to feel that they were safe and secure when on the ground at their major airfields.

Meanwhile, efforts in New York had gained traction. Sweden sent two Saab photo-reconnaissance 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 only be found 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

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

47 Ibid. (24 November 1962). Emphasis added.

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

airfield were vulnerable. Concerns about possible anti-aircraft batteries at some Katangan airfields were also shown to be misplaced.⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰ 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 65 transport aircraft, the largest were propeller-driven DC-4s and ONUC could not move its forces without major support from the US Air Force. The details of the UN requirements were passed to the US Department of Defense by Brigadier-General Indarjit Rikhye, Thant's military attaché, now stationed in the Congo. A few days later, the United States responded that the United Nations could count on US support.⁵¹

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.⁵² 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 US-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 US fighter jets. Thant wanted 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 consider the US offer.⁵³ This was not necessary, however, since the final fight over Katanga began just a few days later.

On Christmas Eve 1962, Katangese gendarmes shot at a UN observation helicopter, fatally wounding an Indian crewmember and forcing the aircraft to land. The crew was seized and beaten.⁵⁴ Elsewhere, Katangan forces began firing continuously at UN positions, fatally wounding several soldiers. The United

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

50 Kalb, *Congo Cables*, 360.

51 Rikhye, *Military Adviser to the Secretary-General*, 302.

52 Kalb, *The Congo Cables*, 362.

53 Kalb, *The Congo Cables*, 365.

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

Nations sought a ceasefire, even escorting Tshombé himself to a point near the fighting. Katanga's 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.⁵⁵ The convincing argument came from radio intercepts that had revealed Katanga's commander had ordered his air force to bomb Elisabethville airport during the night of 29 December.⁵⁶

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 a certain level of surprise. Early on 29 December 1962 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.⁵⁷ Three UN aircraft were hit by ground fire. One plane suffered two bullets through its canopy which, fortunately, failed to hit the pilot. The UN attacks continued through the day and expanded to other Katangan airfields. On 29 December 17 fighter and three reconnaissance 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 the administrative building was also destroyed.⁵⁸ Active patrolling of the skies by the Swedish J-29s effectively cut the air bridge between Katanga and its allies in Portuguese West Africa and Southern Africa, precluding the introduction of new aircraft.⁵⁹ From 28 December 1962 to 4 January 1963 a total of 76 sorties were carried out by UN aircraft against Katanga's airfields and aircraft.⁶⁰

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, Fouga Magisters, and Vampires), only one or possibly two Harvards were not confirmed destroyed.

55 Kalb, *The Congo Cables*, 366–7.

56 Dorn and Bell, *Intelligence in Peacekeeping*, 20.

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

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

59 Johnson, "Heart of Darkness: The Tragedy of the Congo, 1960–67", 11.

60 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 UN Archives, New York, S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0).

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.⁶¹

During Operation Grand Slam, seven UN fighter aircraft and one reconnaissance plane were hit by ground fire but no pilots were injured.⁶² In addition to kinetic action against Katangan air assets, UN fighter aircraft also provided close air support to UN ground forces.⁶³ Also UN forces entered a key mineral facility near Jadotville unopposed, despite threats of sabotage from mercenaries. 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 15 aircraft hidden in Angolan airfields;⁶⁴ this 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”.⁶⁵ Moreover, when the December hostilities had begun, the Katangan air buildup had still been under way 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.⁶⁶

Clearly ONUC’s victory had come just in time; indeed, it might have been a very close call for the United Nations since the Mustang aircraft purchased by Tshombé

61 Ibid, 3. Capitalization in the original.

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

63 Rikhye, *Military Adviser to the Secretary-General*, 310.

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

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid.

were expected to arrive in Katanga in January 1963.⁶⁷ (That month the United Nations received additional Sabre jets from Italy, The Philippines, and Iran,⁶⁸ although these jets did not need to engage in combat.)

The United Nations confirmed that the Katangan air buildup in 1961–1962 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”.⁶⁹

The experience of robust, kinetic air power in the Congo had raised some ethical dilemmas that required tough decision-making by the UN Secretary-General. The day before the surprise attack on the airfield, Thant had cabled General Kebede to forbid the use of napalm, which could be spread by the Indian Canberras and the Swedish Saab 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.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹ 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 Katangese gendarmes, civilians and mercenaries killed is not known.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 7.

⁶⁸ Cooper, T. “Congo, Part 1: 1960–63”, Air Combat Information Group. Available at: http://www.acig.org/artman/publish/article_182.shtml [accessed 7 May 2014].

⁶⁹ Annex C, HQ ONUC, MIL INFO 741, 22 February 1963, “Report of Visit to Kolwezi and Jadotville Airfields 25–29 January 1963”, 9, in UN Archives, New York, S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0). Italics added.

⁷⁰ Incoming Code Cable, Priority, to Kebede Leopoldville, from Secretary-General New York, 28 December, 1962, Number 9153, in UN Archives, New York, S0829-1-13 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0).

⁷¹ Annex C, HQ ONUC, MIL INFO 741, 22 February 1963, “Report of Visit to Kolwezi and Jadotville Airfields 25–29 January 63”, 8, in UN Archives, New York, S0829-1-10 (DAG 13/1.6.5.8.4.0).

Some Lessons with Examples

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

Aerial Reconnaissance: Strengths and Weaknesses

While the importance of air reconnaissance 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 the rebel Congolese forces demanding possession of two Italian aircraft that had just flown in, as well as 14 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 13 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 13 airmen suffered a gruesome death.⁷² This dire situation on the ground was not apparent in the quick reconnaissance flyby on the first day. Apparently, the pilot saw the UN flags flying, the armoured vehicles in good condition, and “deemed the situation on the ground normal”!⁷³

Another situation also showed the limitations of air observation. In 1962, a Swedish transport aircraft was shot down by gunmen in the bush.⁷⁴ To begin

72 The 13 Italian airmen were shot dead. Some were then “butchered and sold as meat at the market in Kindu”. Siebel, N.H., and Lam, M. “Congo Kindu Airport”. Available at: <http://www.the-blue-helmets.ca/documents/Congo%20Kindu%20Airport.pdf> [accessed 7 May 2014].

73 Anonymous. “2Lt. N.H. Siebel PGB and Captain Maurice Lam PGB in the Congo”. Available at: <http://www.the-blue-helmets.ca/documents/Congo%20Kindu%20Airport.pdf> [accessed 7 May 2014].

74 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 it was shot down near Kabongo. After evacuating the burning aircraft

the 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 50 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.⁷⁵

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 Security 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 war between ONUC and 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 10 different operational directives, as described by the academic Trevor Findlay.⁷⁶ Addressing the specifics and impact of each of these transitions is beyond the scope of this chapter. However, some points merit attention both in general terms and due to their relevance to the use of air power 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

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.

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

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

of 21 February 1961 authorized the UN operation to take “all appropriate measures 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 in September 1961 included numerous limitations on the use of military measures.⁷⁷

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. 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”.⁷⁸ 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 Thant was more ready to use force. Though a Buddhist pacifist in personal theology,⁷⁹ Thant believed that ONUC’s mandate to prevent civil war implied armed force, necessitated combat air power, to suppress armed 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”.⁸⁰ November 1961 marked the first time the United Nations issued ROE 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 air power 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 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

⁷⁷ Findlay, *The Use of Force*, 74.

⁷⁸ Findlay, *The Use of Force*, 75.

⁷⁹ Dorn, A.W. “U Thant: Buddhism in Action”, in Kent Kille (ed.), *The UN Secretary-General and Moral Authority: Ethics and Religion in International Leadership* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 143–86. Available at: http://www.walterdorn.net/pdf/UTHant-BuddhismInAction_Dorn_SG-MoralAuthority_2007.pdf

⁸⁰ Outgoing Code Cable, no. 8155, 20 November 1961, from the Acting Secretary-General to Linner, Yacov, Leopoldville, UN Archival document DAG1/2.2.1, #10.

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.⁸¹

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".⁸² Leaflets were dropped by air, telling the Katangese 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. During the buildup, Thant explained, in March 1962, 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".⁸³ By October 1962, the ANC and the ONUC were again suffering from direct attacks by Katanga's aircraft. 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.⁸⁴ This was, in effect, a UN-mandated no-fly zone.

The escalation of events in December 1962, including the shooting down of an ONUC 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".⁸⁵ Tshombé's refusals to order his troops to stop firing, and radio intercepts that revealed that Katanga's commander had ordered his air force to bomb the Elisabethville airport during the night of 29 December, compelled Thant to acquiesce to requests from the 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 (that is, "shoot

81 Fighter Operations Order No. 6, AHQ/66PP/1/F-OPS, undated, UN Archival document no. DAG13/1.6.5.0.0, #7; cited in Findlay, *The Blue Helmets' First War?*, 117.

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

83 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.

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

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

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.⁸⁶ This strong aerial ROE could only be justified by the extreme circumstances that existed in late December 1962, as the fighting had started by Katanga and had continued one-sided for days. The success of the United Nations in destroying the Katangan air assets came as an aerial arms race was growing fierce.

There were objections to the escalation of force, among both 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”.⁸⁷ 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 NATO and other multinational missions, even half a century later in Afghanistan. Furthermore, finding the balance between defence and offence 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 engage in combat 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 the operational mandate. Coordinated air-to-ground attacks were used for the first time in the history of peacekeeping (and ONUC was one of the few UN missions to do this before 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 capability 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 possibly forced to surrender, as the UN’s Irish troops had been forced to do a year earlier. In that instance, Katanga’s single Fouga jet had helped prevent their resupply and reinforcement.

86 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.

87 Hellström, *The Instant Air Force*, 24, citing the J.F. Kennedy presidential archives.

The aim of this chapter 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,⁸⁸ was crucial in 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 surveillance 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 forego attacks on Katanga’s airfields, thus giving the Katangese 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 also 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.

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,⁸⁹ and the Lido Hotel in Elisabethville.⁹⁰ Also an aircraft narrowly missed a building where, unbeknownst to its UN pilots, 150–200 women and children had taken shelter. “It was only due to poor aiming that the bombs did not hit the building” containing the civilians, wrote the Canadian Consul General in Leopoldville. He also wrote that two Canberra

88 The US Air Force flew 2,310 missions, moving 63,884 personnel and 37,202 tons of material from 33 countries during three and a half years of service. See Van Nederveen, Captain Gilles K. “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, AL, September 2001.

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

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

aircraft were on their way to bomb Tshombé's residence before Air Commander H.A. Morrisson (from Canada) in Leopoldville managed to stop the attack.⁹¹ Despite these close calls, far more collateral damage was done by ONUC's ground troops, including the alleged striking of another Katangan hospital by mortar fire.⁹²

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 Central Africa (see Chapter 14 on the Congo in the 2000s). After four years the modern mission began to employ 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.

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91 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, 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.

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

93 Hellström, L. *Fredsflygarna: FN-flyget i Kongo 1960–1964* (Freddy Stenboms Förlag, Svenska, 2003) [in Swedish].

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