

A Short History of Aerial Resupply

Since most of us have had some experience with planning and receiving aerial resupply of food, water, ammunition, etc., during military maneuvers and actual combat, I thought a few comments about what I have learned from that and from some historical documents that I have read during my more or less confinement to quarters due to the Coronavirus epidemic.

Throughout history military opponents have tried to achieve success by using innovative means to supply the troops with “beans and bullets” during combat operations. One of the first innovative uses of aerial vehicles was during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 when French planners tried to resupply a “besieged Paris” by using balloons. While this was not very effective, it set the stage for using “airdrops” from fixed-wing

aircraft in flight during World War I. In Mesopotamia (now Iraq), the British tried to resupply their surrounded 13,000-strong British and Indian Division besieged by the Turks at Kut in 1915. Although able to drop about one-half of the needed supplies from combat airplanes, it was not enough and the British had to surrender after about five months – one of the most humiliating military surrenders in history.

FRANCE and LATIN AMERICA

Later in World War I, during the American Expeditionary Force fighting in the Ardennes Forest of France against the Germans, limited success was achieved when the famous “Lost Battalion” (about 550 men in a battalion task force) of the US 77th Division were surrounded by the Germans and partially resupplied using airdrops. During the World War inter-war years, the US Marine Corps used air cargo operations during the

Second Nicaraguan Campaign (1925-29). However, by the time of World War II, using air transport for front-line military purposes was generally left only to the Colonial Wars.

ABYSSINIA

However, the Second Italian-Abyssinian War (1936-36) saw a significant use of airplanes in warfare. The Italian Air Force (the *Regia Aeronautica*) used aerial resupply to support the Italian troops closing in on Addis Ababa across 120 miles of sparse desert. The Italian troops (called the *fante*) could not stomach canned rations nor live solely on macaroni and wine.

The Italians used three-engine *Caproni Ca 101* aircraft to drop water and live animals by parachute. Sometimes the animals were just thrown out of the airplanes flying at low altitudes. Finally, during the final stages of the advance to Addis Ababa, hundreds of tons of supplies including spaghetti and

soup were parachute in to the troops. It is fitting that the Italians used parachutes because a famous Italian, Leonardo da Vinci, had designed the first parachute in the 15th Century.

SPANISH CIVIL WAR

The Spanish Civil War (1936-39) saw a renewed interest in Aerial resupply. One Nationalist Group led by Generalissimo Francisco Franco became besieged in a monastery on a mountain top from 18 August 1936 to 1 May 1937. Vital ammunition, food, and medicine could only be delivered by parachute on an airbridge from Seville and Cordoba. Air Corps Captain Carlos de Hoya, who was also Franco's personal pilot, use Douglas DC-2 airliners to haul sacks of victuals and ammunition that could be pushed out of the airplanes flying at slow speeds. For the lighter weight loads of food and medical supplies, they were placed in baskets affixed to the feet of live

turkeys and pushed from the aircrafts' bay doors. The turkeys flapped their wing, dampening their descent, and then went into the cooking pot to feed the hungry Nationalist soldiers. Later missions were flown by Italian *Savoia-Marchetti* SM, 81s and *Junkers* Ju-52s from the German Condor Legion. Captain de Hoya and other Nationalist pilots dropped about 300,000 pounds of subsistence on the besieged garrison, but even that could not prevent the garrison's ultimate demise. The Franco loyalists were starved into submission, overrun, and forced to surrender. De Hoya was killed in combat at age 36 nine months' later and is buried in the crypt of the Sanctuary of *Santa Maria de la Cabeza* along with Hernan Cortez of Mexico fame.

STALINGRAD

Stalingrad was the site of the German *Wehrmacht's* great defeat in World War II in late 1942 and early 1943, and another

classic aerial resupply fiasco. It had been one of history's bloodiest battles, and 230,000 of Germany's SIXTH Army were trapped in "Stalin's City" by November 1942. Commanding General Friederich von Paulus reported to Hitler that he had only six days of food left at the end of January 1943. The trapped SIXTH Army needed 750 tons of supplies daily and Herman Goring, the commander of the German *Luftwaffe* assured Hitler that his pilots could provide 500 tons per day of supplies to "get by" with so Hitler ordered a famous "no retreat" order. Goring's massive Air Fleet failed to do that. The *Luftwaffe* never achieved even fifty percent of von Paulus's daily requirements. During that airlift, the *Luftwaffe* only delivered about 113 tons of supply daily. After 23 January, no more aircraft landed in Stalingrad, and ammunition and food had to be air-dropped.

Making things worse, the Luftwaffe loadmasters refused to let the SIXTH Army Quartermasters prioritize the load resulting in many tons of worthless items being parachuted into Stalingrad. In one fiasco, twenty tons of vodka and summer uniforms arrived by air-drop. Another time, thousands of right shoes and boots, but no matching lefts, were dropped on frostbitten and starving soldiers. Another time at Christmas cases of wine were parachuted into Stalingrad in glass bottles that froze and exploded from the freezing cold. Another time Christmas trees were flown in. Other *snafu's* occurred when the German Propaganda Department sent in typewriters and 200,000 knapsacks. Also, a container of Croatian War medals arrived. Another time, 10 tons of "bonbons" arrived, but no fuel for the vehicles. But, probably the most legendary *snafu* was Goring's air-drop of cases of contraceptives for the troops in

Stalingrad even though officially sexual interaction with Russians was forbidden! Ultimately about 100,000 German troops were captured in Stalingrad and only about 5000 ever returned to Germany.

ARNHEM

Arnhem, the “Bridge Too Far,” was a case where the Allied Offensive in the West in September of 1944 was a time for the Allies when optimism ran high in the Allied Camp. Montgomery talked Eisenhower, who favored a broad-front advance into Germany, into going for an Airborne flanking movement into Holland to get into the heart of Germany’s industrial Ruhr in northern Germany.

The plan was a large, strategic gamble using about 20,000 American, British, and Polish paratroopers – the Allied Airborne Army to parachute into Holland while the British Second Army

drove north from Belgium to link up with them at Arnhem.

Operation MARKET GARDEN as it was called was a joint Allied gamble that ultimately failed. Control of the bridge at Arnhem over the Lower Rhine River was unattainable resulting in about 13,000 Allied casualties. Control of the Arnhem Bridge (“The Bridge Too Far”) was unattainable when the 13,000-man British 1st Airborne Division failed to really seize Arnhem resulting in it being reduced to about 3,600 poorly supported men. Overall there were about 13,000 total Allied casualties. Only 41 of 386 tons of supplies reached the stranded British airborne while the German got the rest. The British were stranded in Arnhem and had to infiltrate out through the German lines at night.

Once again it was also a matter of flying in and parachuting in non-essential and useless pieces of military gear such as red airborne berets and other uniform items when what was really

needed was food and ammunition. Prepackaged supplies were packed up for the airborne operation, but in many cases were not checked for how useful they would be in the ensuing battle in which the “Brits” found themselves. Once again it was a matter of rear-echelon incompetence. There was even a case when the British Airborne Division’s Polish liaison officer carried a Red-Cross flag into a German headquarters asking permission to evacuate wounded British and Polish soldiers, and was then generously given some brandy and sandwiches that the Brits had mistakenly parachuted into German hands. It was a clear case of “bureaucratic inflexibility” that caused the British to parachute into combat unnecessary item.

KOREA

At the Chosin Reservoir in the winter of 1950 in North Korea, the US Marines, lacking experience in cold-weather

combat, had little to no experience fighting in extreme cold weather. More than 7,000 Marines would be cold weather casualties.

The ill-prepared Marines relied solely on aerial resupply during their famous retreat from the reservoir. The airdrop loads containing ammunition, rations, and fuel were unpredictably erratic especially because of the cold weather. Once again useless items were parachuted in to include “condoms.” However, one redeeming item was chocolate in the form of *Tootsie Rolls*. Crates of the candy had been duly airlifted from Japan, but the Japanese warehousemen were unaware of the correct supply codes. Rather than mortar rounds and rifle ammunition, the Marines got *Tootsie Rolls* and *Marlboro* cigarettes. However, the *Tootsie Rolls* had some redeeming features. When they arrived, they were frozen hard,

but when warmed up and melted they were pliable and good for quick energy, and also good to plug bullet holes in vehicles and other things because they hardened up nicely in cold weather.

DIEN BIEN PHU

Quality of food and lovemaking have always been part of French society. Both food and love were airlifted into Dien Bien Phu (DBP) in French Indo-China (Vietnam). The battle for DBP and siege lasted 55 days. The French-Colonial garrison presented resupply problems because except for one battalion of the famous Legionnaire French paratroopers (paras), the rest of the 15,000 troops were of colonial composition because it was against French law to send draftees overseas except to North Africa. Thus, the combat troops required typical French/

European food plus pork, plenty of rice, noodles, and *nuoc mom* (a fermented fish sauce).

The Legionnaires were entitled to a quarter-liter of wine daily and expected their *pinard*, a bitter Algerian red wine. Sometimes they received a dehydrated version called *vignogel* that could be delivered dry easily in a sort of sausage roll by aerial resupply. In spite of the desperate situation in DBP, the French expected some of the comforts of life. The French officers usually dined on clean, linen-topped tables with silver eating utensils, and expected their *pinard*. The almost 83,000 parachutes used to drop personnel and supplies into the “bowl” of DBP delivered fine vintage wines, cheeses, and mustard to go along with the regular food. There were about 8500 gallons of *vignogel*, 148 bottles of Cognac and rum, 7680 bottles of beer

as well as pastries, asparagus, and 949 bottles of *eau-de-cologne*.

In addition to the considerable gastronomic efforts, Legionnaires' morale was kept up by the traditional military-operated brothels known as *Bordels Militaries de Campagne* (BMC). Each Legion regiment had its own brothel or BMC. The BMC were thought to relieve depression in isolated tropical outposts and reduce venereal disease which accounted for 20-30 percent of all medical cases. The brothel "ladies" arrived by airplane from Hanoi and even some were reported to have parachuted into DBP. Most were there for the 55-Day siege. Algerian women were also brought in to augment the Asian beauties. The destruction of the airstrip on 28 March stranded the prostitutes who then volunteered as nurses for the rest of

the siege so they earned their keep by the time of the French surrender.

CONCLUSION

The aerial airlift incidents described in this paper highlight the anomalies, resourcefulness, and ingenuity of aerial resupply attempts in combat. At Arnhem, Stalingrad, and DBP, cultural dynamics played a role in the composition of the airdrops. Impractical cultural niceties sometimes overrode military necessities. The examples cited here show how ruthless prioritization of supplies sent in by air sometimes overshadowed and lessened the impact of much-needed combat supplies. Also, these examples can demonstrate that airdrops are not the most efficient method of military resupply because studies have shown that a large percentage did not hit their desired target. Whereas, an analysis of ground logistics

such as the Red Ball Express in Europe during World War II was much more efficient and contributed greatly to victory there.

But, regardless of the military techniques used, aerial resupply has shaped our views about the overall, combat results.