

Introduction

Belgium's Air Transport: The Early Years

Belgium has played a significant role in aviation history, punching positively above its weight as tiny European country - and always in the thick of battle during European conflicts due to its strategic location.

When the German armies overran the Low Countries a second time in 1940, scores of Belgian pilots and personnel made it safely to England and were warmly welcomed by RAF Fighter Command and RAF Bomber Command where they soon were integrated into operational flying units.

The development of transport aircraft in the 1920s and 1930s meanwhile had added a new dimension to the art of warfare. All major powers understood the importance and the need to transport aircraft supplies and materiel from the aircraft manufacturers to the maintenance facilities supporting the training bases as well as being committed to daring airborne operations during the course of the unfolding war.

Belgium's government in exile in London decided at the end of 1943 to form a Transport Unit with 15 new aircraft, refusing a (cheaper) Lend-Lease solution. On May 15, 1944, however there was still plenty of official wrangling and no final decision. In October that year, Belgian aircrews joined 109 (Transport) Operational Training Unit/44 Group at Crosby-on-Eden in Cumberland. From July 1945 onwards, Belgian crews were also trained at 1336 (Transport Support) Conversion Unit/4 Group – all flying C-47A.(1)

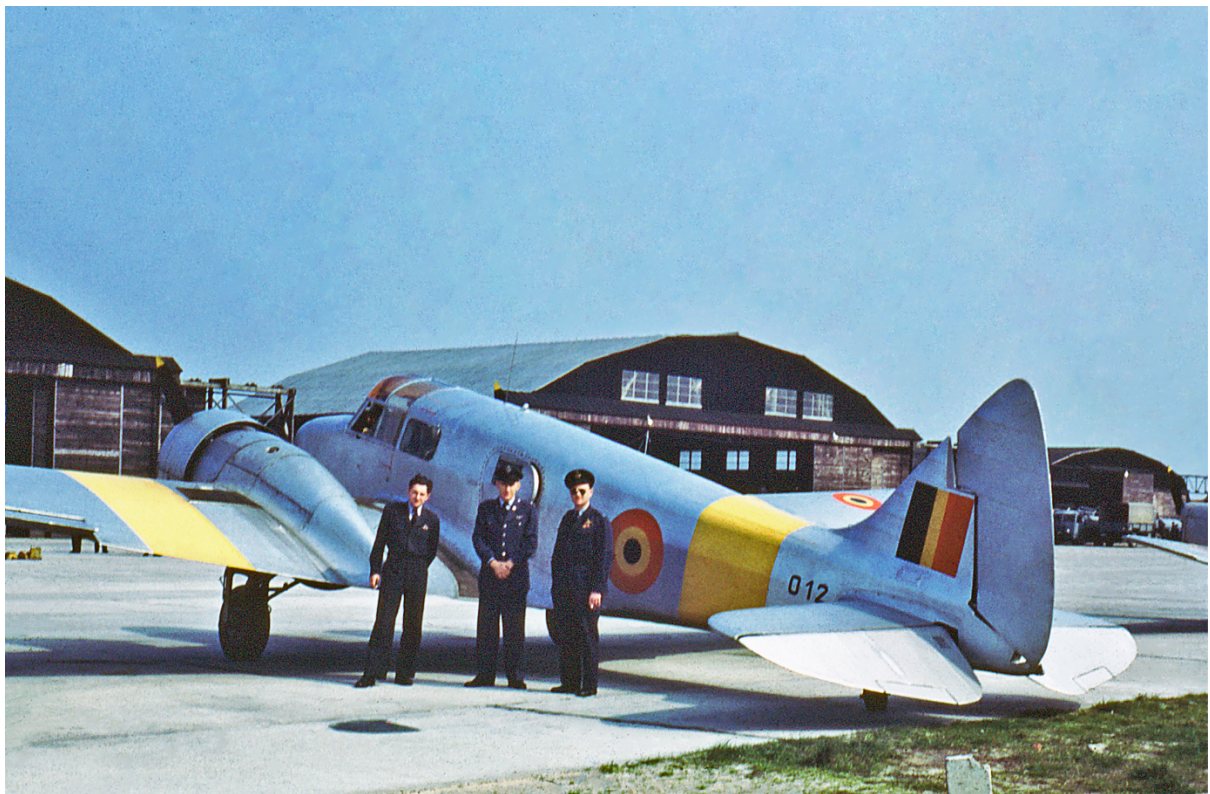
Belgian air crews of RAF Transport Command flew in 187 Squadron from Merryfield, Somerset and in 525 Squadron at Membury – initially flying ferry flights to India and Europe. In 1944 the British Air Ministry withdrew their British crews from 525 Squadron which subsequently became a joint Canadian-Belgian unit flying under British command.

At the close of the war, Belgian crews formed the Belgian Flight of Metropolitan Communication Squadron, liaising between Hendon and Brussels until Aug 15, 1946, when the Belgian contingent was transferred to Haren-Evere, near Brussels, together with Belgian staff seconded from Membury.

The official birth of Belgium's Air Transport Unit dates from April 1, 1947 with the creation of 169 Wing, operating through 366 Squadron with five C-47 Dakotas, and 367 Squadron, equipped with nine AVRO Ansons, six Airspeed Oxfords, four de Havilland Dominies and three Percival Proctors. Three Hawker Hurricanes were added for good measure as communication/recce and meteo aircraft.



Avro Anson Mk I, NA-6 in 1953 at Melsbroek in front of a Fromson hangar. These hangars were built by the Fromson company in Manchester. They are still in place, 75 years later!



366 Squadron had a lucky start, initially taking on one extra C-47 each week! - courtesy of the USAF and their (very) large stock of Dakota aircraft at Fürstenfeldbruck. Belgium received a total of 41 Dakota transporters between 1946 and 1952.

As soon as the Air Transport Wing had been established, plans were being made for the King to travel to the Belgian Congo on a Royal visit. The King traveled with a SABENA commercial airliner and was accompanied by C-47 with tail number K10, refurbished as a VIP aircraft. Under the command of Lt Col Florent Van Rollegem, two crews flew the first VIP flight from Brussels to Leopoldville in Congo in five days, with stopovers in Tunis, Cairo, Khartoum, Juba and Stanleyville. The flight opened a regular route between Belgium and Congo – and the need for a suitable air base was the reason why in the autumn of that same year, a delegation flew to Kamina, south Congo, to study the infrastructural requirements of a military air base in Africa.

In a separate set of events, the importance of airborne elite units had greatly proven their worth on all sides of the conflict. After a rather tumultuous start, Belgium created its own Para Regiment, working in close cooperation with 366 Squadron. On Sept 11, 1947 the first official paradrop with Belgian paras took place over Schaffen, Belgium – the start of a long, distinguished and heroic career for the closely linked airborne components.

Take off for 15 Wing

On May 1, 1948, one year after the Belgian Air Force had officially created its Air Transport Unit, the originally British wartime-patterned structure was renamed 15 Air Transport Wing, with 366 and 367 Squadron rechristened 20 and 21 Squadron.

Chief of Staff, General Lucien Leboutte granted 15 Wing their official motto for 15 Wing is TENACITY, with the crest depicting an Indian Sioux Chief's head.

Origins of the Sioux Chief

In 1937, Sgt Roger Delannay joined the 9/V/1 Ae at Bierset, flying a Renard R-31. Delannay, a former Scout with his totem a Sioux Indian, created the now legendary Sioux Chief crest and the slogan 'TENACITY.' The Sioux was immediately adopted by the pilots of the flight, with the Sioux chief emblazoned on their R-31 whilst the 'TENACITY' slogan was carried on their breast pocket. The 9 Recce squadron carried a Sioux Chief with blue circle while 11 Squadron carried a red circle.

Delannay was shot down in his Fiat CR.42 by a German Me-109 on the first day of hostilities, May 10, 1940 over St Truiden. He parachuted safely but was killed by ground fire. He was due to be married 10 days later...



Monument in honor of Flt Sge Roger Delannay (Hangar Flying – Paul Van Caesbroeck)

During the opening days of the war, aircraft stationed at Steenokkerzeel, near Brussels Airport, carried out successful missions against the German offensive. One of the pilots here was Mike Donnet, who successfully flew a daring flight (with Leon Divoy) with an SV4 (OO-ATD) from the estate of Baron Thierry d’Huart near Quatre Bras, slightly south of Brussels to Thorpe-le-Soken, England. Donnet, who was born in England, flew his Spitfire during the war with the Sioux Chief emblem painted on the nose of his aircraft. He retired as Lieutenant-General in the Belgian Air Force, with over 5,000 flying hours and a DFC with four confirmed kills. He died July 31, 2013, aged 96.

Post-War Multitasking

Firmly embedded in the new post-War military structure, 15 Wing expanded quickly to take on a wide-ranging set of roles including short-haul and long-haul flights (to Africa mainly) – VIP flights as Royal Transport Squadron, paradrops, aerial photography and air transport training unit.

The 1949 international air meet in Brussels attracted well over 100,000 spectators, in awe of the vast array on display of large transporters and the agile fighters of the new jet age aircraft from different European air forces and the USAF – a big PR win for 15 Wing.

New Era – New Missions

At the start of the Fifties, the C-47 workhorses of 15 Wing proved to become cumbersome for Belgium with a 4-5 days travel time to the Congo. They were replaced for passenger transport by an ex-SABENA DC 4 Skymaster in November 1950, followed by a similar one

from SAS in May 1954. The KX-1 and -2 registered Skymasters now did the Brussels-Tripoli-Kano-Leopoldville-Kamina trip in a day and a half – and became the backbone of the air link between Belgium and the Belgian Congo.



DC-4/C-54 OT-CWV next to a USAF C-54 Skymaster (Photo: Guy Visele)



Kamina AB, 1959: Three Bristol Sycamores with C-119s parked before the airport building.



Taken from the Tower at Kamina, two C-119s stand parked while two more C-47 in the background. (Photo: BAF?)

With the C-47 in the process of being phased out, the Belgian Air Ministry decided on a major strategical leap forward and structure 15 Wing as a genuine tactical air transport wing – a smart forward-looking move as it turned out.

The first of two brand new Fairchild C-119 Flying Boxcars landed at Melsbroek Airport on 24 Sept 1952. After initial training at the USAF base in Frankfurt and the necessary paperwork, the first C-119 took to the air with 15 Wing CO Commander Alex Binon at the controls. Binon, a former fighter pilot and a very inspirational leader, would later become the personal pilot of Belgium's King Baudouin, before ending his military career at **Second Allied Tactical Air Force** (2 ATAF), a NATO group under [Allied Air Forces Central Europe](#) tasked with providing air support to NATO's [Northern Army Group](#) (NORTHAG) from Moenchengladbach, Germany.



The delivery of the C-119 was a phased process as the initial batch of 18 C-119F (built in 1952) were complemented in 1953-54 by another 22 C-119G and a follow-up buy of six more Gs in 1958. (Photo: Guy Visele)

Budget restrictions led to the initial 18 C-119F aircraft to be put in storage before being eight of those transferred via MAAG-BELUX to Norway, the 10 remaining being handed back to the USAF. The 'Norwegian' Boxcars remained American property and were after their retirement flown in full USAF livery back to Tucson, AZ.

In spite of the budgetary restrictions at the time, 21 Squadron in 1953 received 12 Percival Pembroke C Mk. 1 to replace the aged Oxford and Anson Mk. 1 – light liaison aircraft with 6-8 passenger seats.



Percival Pembroke OT-ZAI (RM-9) at Melsbroek. (Photo: Guy Visele)

The Pembrokes had been acquired to serve in the Congo; but the C-119 had proven that a high-wing aircraft with a stiff wing design were not suitable for photographic reconnaissance in the turbulent weather conditions of Africa. They were kept in storage at Wevelgem airport until they were integrated into 15 Wing.

The Pembrokes were a dogsbody for the conversion unit, cargo flights, calibration missions and aerial photography – the latter resulting that some Pembrokes were equipped with a glass nose and cameras in the passengers' area

Kamina – Katanga anchor

The Belgian Air Force base of Kamina, at the former Katanga province in south Congo lies at an elevation of 3,543 feet (1,080 m) above mean sea level. It has two runways, each with an asphalt surface measuring 2,700 by 45 metres (8,858 ft × 148 ft). Katanga was a of strategic economic importance for Belgium with its gold, uranium and copper mines.

Kamina was planned as a military fortress to protect the economic interests of Belgium and fielded a sizeable airborne para group with four detachments and an advanced flying school the latter thanks to its ideal flying conditions.

The importance of Kamina can be best understood thanks to a few stats: Cargo operations and para drops carried out by C-47 in 1958 resulted in 2,515 flying hours for the eight C-47 workhorses that year!

However, the new C-119 gradually would take over the heavy task of airlifting with a capacity of 42 fully-equipped paras per flight (instead of 19 on a C-47) and the larger cargo doors a welcome boost to the ever-increasing cargo flights.

Meanwhile, as the focus on the Congo remained high in the turbulent years prior to its independence in 1960, the 50-seat DC 4 proved not as reliable as hoped for. Their lack of pressurization and the unpredictable weather patterns over Africa necessitated long detours and high fuel consumption as the aircraft was forced to fly below 10,000 ft. Hence the decision of the Air Force in 1958 to acquire two USAF DC 6A and two more DC 6B from SABENA in 1960. One of which, the KY-2, became a Royal Flight VIP aircraft.



*Belgian Air Force DC-6B OT-CDA, parked next to C-47 OT-CWA at Melsbroek
(Photo: Guy Visele)*

To underline the strategic importance of the Congo at that time, Belgium decided to a show of force and under the flag of 'Operation Simba' sent two C-119 with a flight of four AVRO Canada CF-100s fighter jets to fly the colours of the mother nation, touring the country and returning home two weeks later. Having advanced fighter jets on the African continent was a European first that turned many a head in awe.



C-119 OT-CBH in 1972 (Photo: Georges Van Belleghem)

1960s – High Noon for 15 Wing

The 1960's saw 15 Wing at its best, a balanced, well-structured unit with enough aircraft to fulfill its role as a multi-tasking air transport wing.

The major highlights of the period for 15 Wing operations were:

- The independence of Congo
- Start of flying operations at Solenzara (Corsica)
- First of the regular transatlantic flights to the USA
- Integration of Air Transport duties along NATO exercises
- Development of humanitarian missions across the world
- Tactical support for the 1964 uprising in Congo

Congo

With the global push for independence of erstwhile colonial territories in full swing, Belgium had increased its air power at Kamina from three to seven C-47 with another six C-119 troop transporters to support its economic interests.

A series of political and military events in the summer of 1960 resulted in over 860 missions flown with nearly 4,000 people evacuated to safety from the Congo. Detailed information on these events can be found in a series of publications [here](#).

Two accidents were reported in 1961-1963, both involving C-119 Flying Boxcars.

Just before X-Mas 1961, two C-119s (CP-23 and -25) collided in flight over Chievres in southern Belgium, killing 13.

On June 26, 1963, C-119 CP-45, diverted from the drop zone because of high winds was hit by British mortar fire as it was being directed by the Gutersloh GCA to land at the British air base there. A mortar grenade fired during an exercise at that precise moment, hit the starboard wing and as the aircraft, quickly engulfed in flames, went down, nine paratroopers on board were pushed out by dispatcher NCO Edmond Chabot before the aircraft hit the ground. 33 paras and five crew, including Chabot, did not survive the crash.

On October 22, 1965 the BAF lost a fifth C-119G. CP-19 hit the ground during a heavy drop at night above the Veckerhagen DZ, Germany. Sadly the crew and three paratroopers were killed in the crash.

Solenzara

With the Congo chapter now firmly closed, 1 Battalion Para was looking for a suitable training grounds outside Belgium – to prepare for international missions as part of their NATO commitments.

Far from ideal weather conditions in Belgium (“Belgium has all of the British weather, just one day later.”) were part of the obstacles of the paratroopers to acquire a world-class standing; the small size of the country being another factor, closer cooperation with France was soon a fact.

The French air base at Solenzara on the island of Corsica was already in use by the Belgian Air Force, to train their fighter pilots in air-air and air-ground combat, requiring significant air transport logistics support. 15 Wing built on this expertise to become a fully-fledged international air transport specialist with a growing reputation as a can-do Wing. The paratroopers loved it from the get-go.

NATO

In the 1960, NATO created ACE Mobile Forces as a fast mobile force command to strengthen the northern part of NATO in Scandinavia as well as in the south and east towards Turkey, should a military threat materialize. Annual military exercises on a grand scale gave 15 Wing valuable expertise in deploying mobile fighting forces fast to the edges of the NATO alliance’s battlegrounds.

Transatlantic Flights

Captain Raymond Baccaert is credited as the first to inaugurate the transatlantic flights between Belgium and the USA. Following training at the Military Air Transport Service (MATS) on McGuire AFB (New Jersey) and test flights with a USAF and a US Navy DC 6, Capt. Baccaert flew DC 6 KY-1 from Brussels over Prestwick and Goose Bay to McGuire on Dec 17, 1962, opening a new line for 15 Wing. The arctic conditions however required a total new insight in flying compared to the ones they had until then enjoyed flying over Africa! The maiden trip however was the start of a regular line to ferry Army and Air Force specialists over for advanced weapons training.

1964 Uprising

The young Republic of Congo was close to implosion in 1964 and Belgium was asked for support in helping create the *Force Aeriennne Tactique Congolaise* (Fatac). The Brussels-Kamina air bridge was reinstated and 15 Wing excelled in numerous ferry flights, para drops and cargo flights throughout this turbulent period. Heroic flights abound and some of them can be found [here](#).

During this time, 15 Wing developed a system of free drops, as braking chutes were unknown at that time. The aircraft would approach the drop zone at a height of 20-30 meters, with minimum flying speed and at the captain's go, the aid packages were pushed out of the plane. The risks involved were high but the crews of 15 Wing did a sterling job and never lost an aircraft. The system developed by 15 Wing later became known as VLAD (Very Low Altitude delivery) and was the precursor to the current world standard VLAGES drop technique (*Very Low Altitude Gravity Extraction System*).



Low Level dropping of humanitarian Aid in Africa. (Photo: BAF)

The Seventies: Clean Sweep

After 20 years of service, the C-119 Flying Boxcars were officially retired from service in 1972 but kept flying until the last five landed at Koksijde on July 9, 1973. with 157,500 flying hours on the clock, with the loss of five aircraft in the course of their active life. More than a quarter of a million para drops took place out of the reliable C-119, 30,000 of these in free fall.

Four years later, on July 23th, 1976, the C-47, K-8 was flown to Coxyde AB for the last time by Jacques Lebeau (first pilot), Poly Stevens (co-pilot) and navigator Ernest Moiny. This aircraft, sold in France, was shot down a little later over Mozambique. At the same time, the Pembrokes and the DC 6 also took their leave.

With a near clean sweep, comes a new wind they say - and 15 Wing welcomed their first Lockheed C-130H Hercules on July 25, 1972 with Flight Commander Charlie Vingerhoets at the controls of the CH-01 upon landing at their home base of Melsbroek.

The C-130 was quickly embraced by all as the new, very reliable workhorse, capable of operating from rough, dirt strips - and and the prime transport for airdropping troops and equipment into hostile areas. The C-130 ability to be rapidly reconfigured for various types of cargo such as palletized equipment, floor-loaded material, airdrop platforms, container delivery system bundles, vehicles and personnel or aeromedical evacuation – made it a love at first flight.

When a fighter wing deployed to Solenzara for training, five C-130 now carried out a full logistics support mission in nine hours, compared to a flight of 10 C-119 with a 20-hour turnaround time, including a forced night stop at Corsica.

The Pembrokes were complemented by two Swearingen 3/Merlin while two new Dassault Falcon 20E for VIP flights, urgent medical flights for organ transplants and fast airlift of patients. That same year, 1976, saw the four DC 6 being replaced by two former SABENA Boeing B 727 and the first of three Hawker Siddeley HS 748.



Rare photo of Swearingen 3 Merlin CF-03 during maintenance at Melsbroek. The CF-03 crashed at Lille-Lesquin, France on April 16, 1980 with the loss of both pilots.

Hunger

The gripping photos of the African drought in the early 1970 that shook the world into action, also made a lasting impact on 15 Wing. The vast Sahel, which runs nearly the breadth

of the continent, south of the Sahara Desert, experienced some of its driest conditions (with 60C temps) in years. With the horrendous food crisis came help through international aid organizations, supported by 15 Wing. A non-stop supply chain was organized, flying in food supplies from Belgium between May-September 1973 and continuing for another five months in 1974 - flying local rescue and supply missions in Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso and Mali.

The now well-established Very Low Drop system was shown to the international community and adopted worldwide, with a package loss under 3.5 %, a revolutionary technique!

Wide Horizon of Missions

In 1975, 15 Wing participated at a critical relief mission of Portuguese settlers from Angola, pending the independence of that African nation.

A year later, Guatemala was hit by a 7.5 magnitude earthquake, killing 23,000 and injuring another 76,000 over an area of some 30,000 sq km. A C-130H from 15 Wing flew a relief mission as part of the international humanitarian aid efforts.

Also in 1976, 15 Wing participated at 'A Bridge too Far', the movie on the mainly airborne 'Operation Market Garden' at Arnhem with a para drop from a C-130 whilst a C-47 flew past – creating the illusion of a 1944 para drop 😊

Red Bean

1978 was an infamous year for Belgium. A flare up of anti-European sentiment culminated in 2,000 rebels and foreign mercenaries, attacking and overwhelming Kolwezi, a town of 100,000 in ore-rich Shaba Province, Congo, in an orgy of violence on May 11, 1978.



Kolwezi, 1978. (Photo: BAF)

Belgium immediately took action and marshalled 10 C-130 Hercules and its two B-727 for the support and relief operation, codenamed 'Red Bean'. SABENA flew in the rest of the Para regiment on eight B-707 flights. In a coordinated campaign, the rebels were pushed out of Kolwezi, liberating hundreds of Europeans and flying them to safety. The complex operation, involving USAF C-141 to ferry fuel in, one C-130H temporarily was kitted out as a tanker aircraft, shuttling 24/7 between Kamina and Kinshasa to ensure that flying operations were secure. The operation ended May 20, 1978 with the uprising crushed and Kolwezi back under control of local forces. 2,200 Europeans and 3,000 Africans were evacuated, while 60 Europeans and about 100 Africans were massacred. One Belgian paratrooper was killed in the operation.

Humanitarian Missions: 1980-1989

The Eighties were defined by a series of humanitarian missions flown by 15 Wing to support crisis after crisis across the globe.

Having earned its stripes as the world-class Go-To air transport specialists, 15 Wing upped the standard of relief missions wherever they went. The combined C-130 airlift platform and the professionalism and dedication of the Belgian ground personnel and flying crews ensured for a permanent capability to quickly deploy humanitarian relief where it was needed most. Their peacetime missions helped and still help enhance today the ability of the Belgians to improve on their military mission capability as part of NATO's Strategic Airlift Capability – most recently in action during the evacuation of Kabul in August 2021.

Various international relief missions were carried out in this period:

- December, 1981: North Yemen: Earthquake
- October 1983; Erzurum, Turkey: Earthquake
- January 1984: SAR before the Scottish Coast for missing trawler.
- October 1984: Bolivia: three missions to deliver a total of 45 tons technical aid for Belgium's Development Agency
- December 1984 - 1987: start of a multi-year airlift program to help the population in Ethiopia stricken by drought, poverty and political upheaval.
- April 1989: UN Operation *Lifeline*, to create an air bridge between Khartoum and southern Sudan



- *Humanitarian Aid Mission by 15 Wing C-130 in Eastern Africa. (Photo: BAF)*

- March 1989: Help Morocco fight a locust pest
- August 1989: Relief flights to support refugees from Burundi to Rwanda following political turmoil in the region



Delivering another cargo load of humanitarian aid. (Photo: BAF)

- October 1989: In support of a Nicaragua tornado relief program.
- October 1989: Humanitarian aid program to Niger, West Darfur/Sudan for the EU

- December 1989: Armenia earthquake: Between 25,000 and 50,000 were killed and up to 130,000 were injured. A 15 Wing C-130 chartered by Medecins sans Frontieres and Association of Armenians in Belgium with medical aid, blankets and tents.
- December 1989: Popular uprising in Romania: Medical support flights, including 800 liters of blood for Romania's hospitals and numerous humanitarian flights, one including flying out adoption children to Belgium.
- Throughout 1989: Technical Training support of the Zairean Air Force by 15 Wing.

Melsbroek comes of Age

The continuous series of humanitarian missions throughout the 1980s proved invaluable for the dedicated men and women of 15 Wing to further hone their already considerable skills. It consistently earned them kudos in the highest echelons of governments across the globe and at airfields in the stricken regions.

At the same time, 15 Wing home base at Melsbroek, adjacent to Brussels National Airport and both using the same runways and ATC, had become Belgium's second largest airport. In 1986 for example, the airport registered 3,250 movements with a total of 45,225 passengers and more than 4,000 tons of cargo shipped in and out. That year, 15 Wing received for their tireless efforts in support of global relief missions the prestigious Etienne Dufosse award. Karel Vervoort, CO 15 Wing at the time said: "This collective award reflects well the combined efforts of our dedicated aircrew and non-aircraft personnel."

Airlift Competition – Central African Operation - Desert Shield/DesertStorm

Invited to participate at the annual USAF *MAC Tactical Airlift Competition*, Belgium in 1990 further earned the admiration of international airlift transport professionals from the 13 participating countries.

That same year, 15 Wing would be buzzing like a beehive! In August, eight C-130 and one B727 were ferrying staff out of Zaire at the end of Belgium's technical cooperation program there while shortly afterwards, Belgian C-130 were in action to repatriate 9,400 Egyptian refugees from Iraq and Kuwait, who were stranded in Jordan. In the midst of this program, part of the ongoing Gulf crisis at the time, 15 Wing in October successfully managed Operation Green Beam to protect and guarantee safe passage out of Rwanda of fellow Belgians, in light of the political crisis there. One month earlier, Operation Blue Beam, in cooperation with the USAF and SABENA, had evacuated 4,000 westerners from the deepest pockets of this vast African country.

At the same time, 15 Wing C-130Hs airlifted US, French and British coalition equipment and materiel into Saudi-Arabia. The Belgian Hercs also supported Belgian minesweepers operating of the coast of Kuwait. And, adjacent to Desert Shield and Desert Storm, 15 Wing flew the elements of a Dutch Patriot missile system to Dyarbakir in eastern Turkey.

In 1991, Save The Children requested Belgium to help the local population in Somalia, following a civil war there. 15 Wing came to the rescue and proved to be the only aircraft allowed to fly missions for various NGOs from Nairobi to Mogadishu – showing how Belgian diplomacy and airlift skills go hand in hand, magic happens.

This C 130 was withdrawn and sent to Iran after an urgent request from the international community to help Kurdish refugees who had fled Iraq into western Iran.

15 Wing also was instrumental in giving 100 children from Chernobyl a happy summer holiday with foster parents in Belgium that year – an operation repeated the following year with 150 kids from this nuclear disaster area.

Halfway Home

In 1992 and after 20 years of service, 15 Wing received confirmation of a Midlife Update for their highly productive C-130 aircraft, with new wings, a facelift that included pyrotechnic protection against ground-air and air-air missiles, and a state of the art avionics suite in the cockpit.

Some statistics here will give more insight of what it means to be a flying workhorse over 20 years: The 12 C-130 Hercs totalled 104,000 flying hours between them, flying over 900,000 paras to the dropzone. At the height of the Sahel drought relief program, 15 Wing dropped 7,760 tons of food safely for a grateful population thanks to their world-class VLAGES system.

Operations Silver Back and Blue Safari

But the world never stands still. The horrific events of the conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes in Rwanda that led to an estimated one million people killed, made for a highly flammable situation to secure the extraction of Europeans.

Dubbed Operation Silver Back, C-130 aircraft from 15 Wing loaded up troops and materiel in Europe and flew to Nairobi as their Forward Operating Base (FOB). For the operation into Kigali an assault landing and an alternative airdrop operation had been prepared. However after Belgium's 2 Commando Bn, which was in Rwanda under UN-flag, secured Kigali Airport by the time of arrival of the Hercs, the plans changed and cautionary but normal landings were flown. Belgian paratroopers then scoured the capital city and its surroundings for people in need of repatriation and secured a successful extraction of 1,400 people with the final flight out April 19, 1994.

With anti-Belgian sentiment running high, Operation Blue Safari started the same day, and ensured the safe withdrawal of all military staff and materiel from Rwanda with Hercules turnaround times at 10 minutes and engines running – underlining the high levels of professionalism of all involved. This was an international effort with the support of **some** NATO countries and local governments in Kenya, Tanzania and Djibouti signing off for a successful mission, once again.

Falcon 900

In all the hubbub of international rescue missions, one key component of 15 Wing has been a bit overlooked. VIP transport had taken a backseat for a while but this was soon put right with the arrival of a second-hand Falcon 900 on March 13, 1994.

Eindhoven

On July 15, 1996, a birdstrike hit CH-06 on approach to Eindhoven airport after a flight from Villafranca, Spain. On board were four Belgian crew members and 37 musicians from the Dutch Army Band. The flight was part of a joint agreement whereby Belgian F-16s could fuel up from Dutch KC-10 tankers whilst the Dutch could make use of the Belgian Air Transport component. The accident cost 34 lives, including the entire crew. The annual military parade in Brussels one week later on July 21, saw a C-130 flight with a 'missing wing man' formation fly over the tens of thousands of people present.

The two B 727s, serving since 1975, were replaced in 1998 by two former SilkAir A310 aircraft. Airbus aircraft were preferred as NATO members France and Germany already had A310 aircraft in their fleets.

The A 310 CA01 and 02 were delivered in September 1997 and April 1998 respectively. The A 310s were deployed during NATO and national manoeuvres, humanitarian programs and on request of EACC (*European Airlift Coordination Center*); Decked out in VIP lay out, the aircraft was also the official Royal Flight aircraft during this period.

In 2009, the A 310 were first replaced by a dry-leased A330 (registration CS-TMT) and in turn later on replaced in 2014 by another dry-leased Airbus, an A321-231 (registration CS-TRJ).

New Millenium, New Challenges

The new millennium was just a few days old when the southwest of France was hit by a terrible winter storm. Belgian C-130 immediately swung into action and sent troops and materiel to the stricken region. At precisely the same time, another mission started out from Melsbroek to help the starving population of Tirana, Albania during NATO operation Joint Falcon in the chaotic wars of the Balkans at the time.

Two months later, 15 Wing was helping out in Mozambique during a series of floodings. Belgium at its very best.

Mc Chord AFB: Good Show!

In the Spring of 2000, 15 Wing and a selection of Belgian paratroopers were invited to participate the USAF annual airlift competition at at McChord AFB, WA.

In total 100 teams participated at this highly prestigious battle of the best. Belgium's C-130H was the sole entrant with the updated avionics suite, leaving out the need of a navigator!



15 Wing went home with two top prizes for Belgium: Best Air Crew and best International Team! Good Show !! (Photo: BAF)

New Look

As the new millennium was taking shape, so was the new look of 15 Wing.

The three HS 748 and five Swearingen 3 Merlin were coming at the end of their cycle and were taken out of service in July 2001 and August 2002 respectively.

Two new EMBRAER 135 and two -145 regional jets were acquired in 2000 and adapted for medevac missions as well as VIP flights. These ERJ-135/145 were withdrawn from service in 2019 while the Falcon 20 and 900 were retired in 2019. Two Dassault Falcon 7X (OO-Lum and OO-FAE) on dry lease from Luxaviation replaced these VIP aircraft and are currently in use.



Dassault Falcon 7X (Photo: Kristof Moens, BAF)

Airbus A321-231 (reg. CS-TRJ) with a capacity of 152 passengers leased since May 2014 from Portuguese company HiFly made its final flight from Melsbroek in December 2020. The reason was that Belgium had joined the NATO Multi Role Tanker Transport (**MRTT**) Program with Airbus A-330 to be stationed at Eindhoven, The Netherlands.

The venerable C 130, loved and trusted by all, was also showing their age by now, proving that time never stops for anyone.

On 27 May 2003, Belgium (together with France, Germany, Luxembourg, Spain, Turkey, and the United Kingdom) ordered 7 Airbus Defence and Space (formerly Airbus Military) A400M airlifters to replace its Lockheed C-130 Hercules transport aircraft. The Belgian Air Component will also manage the single aircraft bought by Luxembourg. The first aircraft, CT-01 for the Luxembourg Armed Forces, arrived at Melsbroek airbase on 9 October 2020, followed by the first Belgian Air Force machine (CT-02) on 20 December 2020. The full complement of 15 Wing A400M aircraft will be completed by 2024.



Approach of Airbus A400M towards Melsbroek (Photo: Kristof Moens, BAF)



15 Wing's visibility in the world continue apace with humanitarian missions all over the world – most recently the evacuation at Kabul in August 2021. That famous Sioux Indian

Chief's head is as well-known across the globe as is Belgium's warm hospitality and that strong can-do attitude. Tenacity!



DAKOTA

Where do old aircraft go? The lucky ones go to airfields where they are carefully restored and cared for by dedicated volunteers for the benefit of the generations of today and tomorrow.

In Belgium, the only museum exclusively dedicated to military airlift history is found at Melsbroek, next to the current 15 Wing AFB.

It happens also to be one of the rare museums in the world dedicated to Air Transport.

Preserving the incredible heritage of air mobility requires a Team effort of volunteers and financial supporters to advance our mission as an aviation education, cultural, historical, and inspirational facility for the public and for the Belgian Air Force Community.

1992 saw the take-off of DAKOTA as a non-profit organization to celebrate the exploits of 15 Wing. Founded by former CO Col (Ret) Jo Huybens – a passionate flyer and a highly

respected leader of men - Huybens was convinced that the legacy and truly remarkable accomplishments of 15 Wing should be preserved and celebrated.

Col (Ret) Huybens, who passed away in 2003 after a long illness, had requested Lt-General (Ret) Rene Hoeben to take his place at the helm of DAKOTA. Hoeben, a former CO TCU (Transport Conversion Unit), 20 Squadron, 15W Operations Group and 15 Wing flew C-119 from 1969. He converted to C-130 in 1972 and flew the aircraft until his retirement in 1997.

Current President is Colonel (Ret) Jacques Lousberg, erstwhile in charge of the C-130 avionics upgrade program, CO TCU, 20 Squadron and 15W Operations Group as well as commander of the then newly formed Movement and Transport Coordination Center at the Ministry of Defence. Col Lousberg mainly flew C-130 and A310 in 15 Wing until his retirement in 2005. He had a second career in commercial aviation as an A 310, A330, A340 and A380 captain and ended his career with 24,390 flying hours

Today, DAKOTA is a well-run non-profit organization whose mandate is to acquire, document, preserve and maintain a collection of aircraft that were flown by the Belgian military transport wing from the beginning of World War II to the present. Their role is to preserve the artifacts, books, periodicals and manuals relating to this mandate. The Museum now houses representations of all aircraft that ever flew with the 15th Wing, an extensive aviation Exhibit Gallery and the most up to date archive on all aircraft types, upgrade programs and missions prepared, flown and safely maintained by the men and women of the 15th Wing.

DAKOTA has the following aircraft in its static collection:

- C-47
- Percival Pembroke
- C-119
- B-727 Cockpit (in the process of restauration)

The association has a comprehensive aviation library and impressive photo and video collection of all aircraft types ever flown by 15 Wing. Mission logbooks from aircrew can be consulted on request.

Restauration programs of a B 727 cockpit and a C 130 aircraft are ongoing.

With COVID restrictions soon to be lifted, DAKOTA is looking forward to receiving visitors again to their educational Exhibition Centre as well as the static aircraft display. Residing next to the operational 15 Wing airfield, visitors may also be rewarded with A-400M training flights taking off and landing at Melsbroek.

Visit <http://dakota15wing.be> for more information.

The Museum's collection is made up largely of artifacts donated by the public. We appreciate your desire to become involved in preserving aviation history. The Museum welcomes and encourages charitable donations to its collection of artifacts, memorabilia, and objects of significance to military aviation, particularly relating to 15 Wing.

Should you like to donate to the museum, please contact Eric Dauchy at +32 498 513 077 or at secretariaatdakota@gmail.com. Please send information regarding donation via email or phone prior to bringing any objects to the museum.

With thanks to Piet Claes [“Historiek van de 15e Wing”](#) and the team at DAKOTA for their invaluable support.

(1), Serge VERBEECK, *De C-47B Dakota bij de Belgische Luchtmacht* (C-47 Dakota with the Belgian Air Force) can be obtained at [The Flying Twins](#) or from [the author](#) for 40 EUR, with 8 EUR port.