



Military Airlift and Aircraft Procurement: The Case of the C-5A

Office of Air Force History, U.S. Air Force

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This is the third in a series of research studies—historical works that were not published for various reasons. Yet, the material contained therein was deemed to be of enduring value to Air Force members and scholars. These were minimally edited and printed in a limited edition to reach a small audience that may find them useful. We invite readers to provide feedback to the Air Force History and Museums Program. The author, Marcelle S. Knaack, a member of the Office of Air Force History, undertook the research and writing of this book as a consultant, after she retired. Tragically, she passed away in November 1996, before she completed the manuscript. Her colleague, Bernard C. Nalty, also retired by that time, undertook to complete Ms. Knaack's work. At first glance, the history of the C-5A Galaxy seems to be nothing more than a compilation of contradictions. Ordered under a totally new procurement concept specifically designed to control costs, the C-5A aircraft ended up costing a small fortune. Its purchase in 1965 depended on achieving an initial operational capability no later than 1969, but the transport did not appear in South Vietnam in a truly operational capacity until August 1971. Although built by the Lockheed-Georgia Company, celebrated for its success with military transports like the C-130 Hercules and C-141 Starlifter, the C-5A program from the very start encountered serious technical problems, delays, and exorbitant cost overruns, which combined to trigger several congressional investigations. Although the program contracted in size under the pressure of these failings, it survived congressional opposition and began to demonstrate its unique value during the last year of the Vietnam War, even though operating under weight restrictions. In October 1973, moreover, the C-5A helped provide Israel with a constant flow of supplies to ensure victory over the attacking Egyptian and Syrian armies. Into the 1980s the C-5A operated under increasingly stringent flying restrictions because the flawed wing structure deteriorated until it had to be replaced. While under these restrictions, the C-5A could carry just 174,000 pounds of cargo, roughly 100,000 pounds more than the C-141, but 46,000 pounds less than the Galaxy's design objective. Although installation of the heavier new wing would probably prevent the airplane from ever attaining the design capacity of 220,000 pounds, the Military Airlift Command was determined to extend the service life of the C-5A because its performance remained so impressive even with a reduced load. The improvements that strengthened the structure of the C-5A were incorporated in a new version of the Galaxy, the C-5B, for which Lockheed-Georgia reopened its production line. The modified A-model and the new C-5B did everything expected of a heavy-logistics transport during the Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991.

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