



**OPERATION  
BIG LIFT—  
Model for the  
Cold War Army**

The warning order was issued on 18 Oct 1963, after months of heightened international tension, smaller altercations, and a buildup of enemy forces along our allies' borders. By the 21<sup>st</sup>, the situation had become so tenuous that the Joint Chiefs issued deployment orders to the 2d Armored Division Fort Hood, TX. Thereafter, events moved quickly.

## FORT HOOD, TX—OCT 1963



Troops load onto a chartered bus for the trip to the airfield.



A long line of soldiers emerges from the darkness to attach the equipment of a M48A1 tank which will be shown to them.



The equipment gear of a M48A1 tank which will be shown to them.



Some of the soldiers are seen loading the gear of a M48A1 tank which will be shown to them.



A large C-119 aircraft is seen on the airfield area which will be used as a staging area for the 2d Armored Division in Germany.

The men of the 2d Armored gathered their gear as an unusually warm autumn sun baked the Texas flatlands. Later that day, they began boarding buses for the trip to nearby airfields. Around midnight on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, sweating in their winter uniforms, the first troops began hoisting their rucksacks and personal weapons onto assemblies of large cargo aircraft.

## TROOP MOVEMENTS

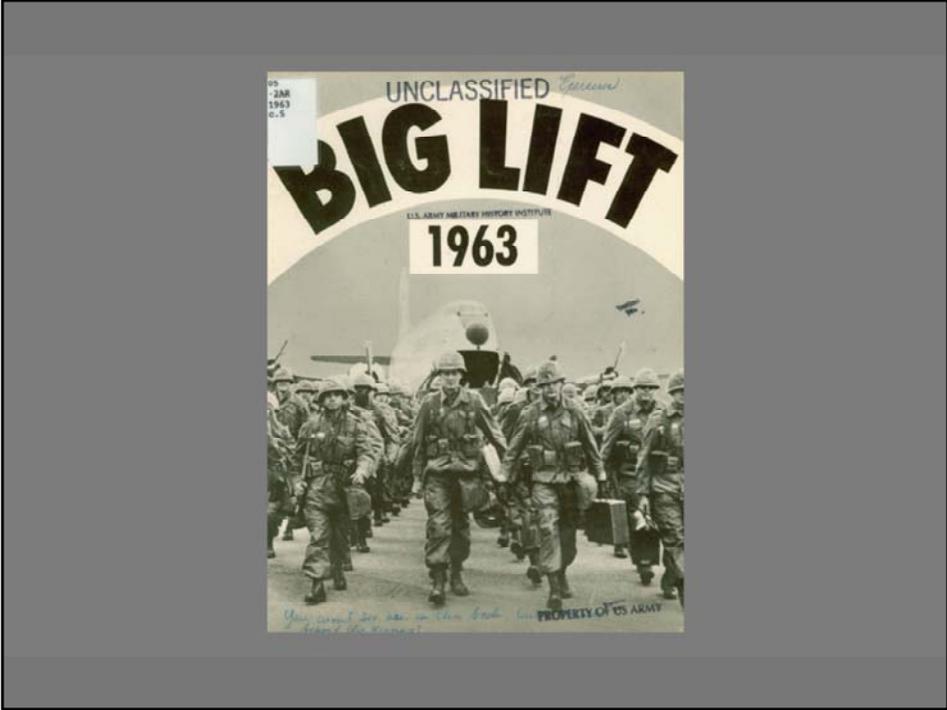
- 13, 000 Troops from the 2d Armored Division, Fort Hood, TX
- 1,500 Support Personnel from around the country
- 1,500-man Composite Air Strike Force

Over the next 64 hours, 13,000 troops from 2d Armored and 1,500 support personnel from around the country, made daylong flights to Germany and France. A 1,500-man composite air strike force went as well. The troop movements were real, but the crisis that prompted them was entirely notional. Instead of being met in Europe by thousands of enemy tanks, the men of the 2d Armored were greeted by...

# CAKE!!



a 350-pound cake shaped like a tank. The operation was, in fact, a preplanned training exercise, aptly named...



BIG LIFT, because it was the largest airlift of troops to that date.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE,  
ROBERT S. MCNAMARA  
1961-1968



"A Dramatic Illustration  
of the U.S. Capability  
for the  
Rapid Reinforcement of NATO"

Its purpose, as Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara announced on 23 September, was to "provide a dramatic illustration of the U.S. capability for the rapid reinforcement of NATO."



Its two audiences, were--Our NATO allies, whom the administration wanted to convince we could protect with fewer troops stationed in Europe; and the Warsaw Pact, whom the administration wanted to convince we could defeat with fewer troops stationed in Europe.

**REFORGER**  
(RETURN OF FORCES TO GERMANY)  
1969-1993

- 1968 → Redeployed 2 of 3 Brigades from a Division in Germany; kept one in country
- 1969 → Began Regularly Airlifting 2 Brigades back to Germany for Exercises

Now, many remember the Return of Forces to Germany Operations, or REFORGER, held annually from 1969 to 1993. In REFORGER the U.S. airlifted a division or less to Europe. But, its progenitor, BIG LIFT, has faded into historical obscurity. It is my hope, here to rescue BIG LIFT from its relative anonymity, and to illustrate how it became the Army's model for a land war in Europe. Before I get started, however, I should note that this paper is a distillation of part of a chapter in a book that I am preparing for the Center of Military History. The information, opinions, and any misstatements of fact, therefore, are all my own, and do not reflect those of the U.S. Army.

# FLEXIBLE RESPONSE STRATEGIC MOBILITY

- Flexible Response
  - Provide military options short of all-out nuclear war
- Pre-positioning
  - Heavy Equipment for 2 Divisions & 10 Support Units
  - Bring only necessary “*vehicles and consumables*”
  - 90% less expensive than a full airlift
- LONG THRUST Rotation Exercises, 1962-1964
  - Test of **Strategic Mobility** Concept
  - Airlifted 1 battle-group/2 Brigades (1,500 TROOPS)

The Kennedy Administration designed BIG LIFT to test a fundamental component of its strategic policy called Flexible Response, under which it sought to develop military options short of all-out nuclear war. BIG LIFT would assess one such option, the military's ability to airlift a large conventional force to Europe on short-notice. Key to the strategy was the concept of pre-positioning. Instead of airlifting an entire unit with all its equipment, Secretary McNamara had recommended to the President storing the necessary “vehicles and consumables” near front lines such as Central Europe, and transporting only soldiers and their immediate gear. Expense, McNamara made clear, was a key consideration, noting that his plan would cost 90 percent less than an all-out airlift. The concept became known as Strategic Mobility. The U.S. began implementing the concept in 1962, when, in response to the Berlin Wall Crisis, it pre-positioned enough equipment in Europe for 2 divisions and 10 support units. It also began regularly rotating a 1,500-man force in and out of Germany, under an exercise designated LONG THRUST.

## USAREUR—SEVENTH ARMY



230K Troops + 200k Civilians (U.S. & Foreign) + 200k Dependents

The force in Europe at the time was the US Army, Europe or USAREUR, a large, multifarious organization, with close to 270,000 troops, 200,000 civilians, and 200,000 dependents. Its principal subordinate command, was Seventh Army, which oversaw operations in central and southern Germany, where the exercises were held.

# LARGER TEST



- One Armored Division
- Six Support Units
- A Composite Air Strike Force

By mid-1963, the U.S. had staged 7 LONG THRUST rotations, making them relatively routine affairs. McNamara decided therefore, to begin planning for a larger test that would involve an entire armored division, six support units, and a composite air strike force, over ten times the size of LONG THRUST. The troops would deploy on short notice under simulated emergency conditions, and hold field exercises with the pre-positioned equipment. The final plan was hammered out in Washington in mid-July. It called for a 64-day operation, involving the 2d Armored and support units. Only four-days were allotted for the airlift, about the same amount of time as the smaller LONG THRUST. The operation was scheduled to begin in late autumn, so that the troops would do less damage to crops, and USAREUR, could complete a restructuring it was undertaking.

## 4<sup>th</sup> INFANTRY DIVISION FORT LEWIS, WA



To expand the operation's realism, McNamara decided in late August to have the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division Fort Lewis, Washington— the other division slated to deploy to Europe in an emergency— simulate a simultaneous wartime deployment to Seventh Army's southern region during the actual airlift.

## President John Fitzgerald Kennedy

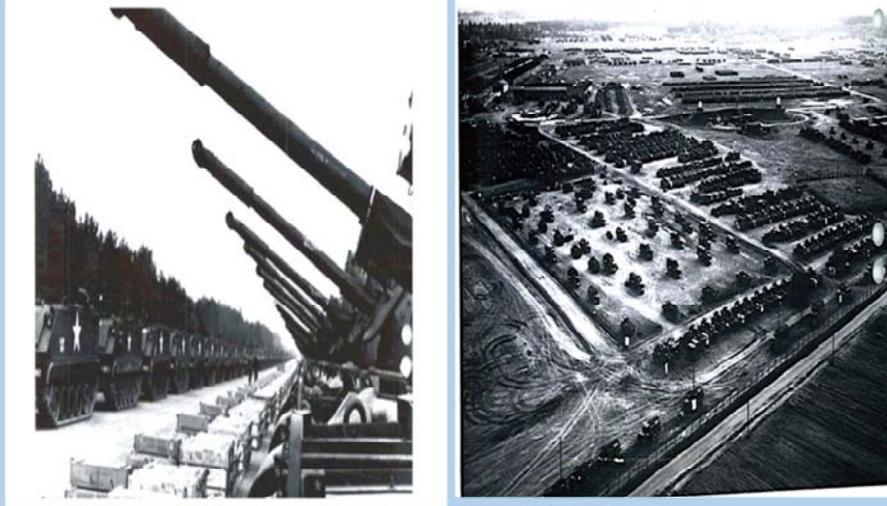


McNamara informed President Kennedy about the plan in August, writing that the time had come to test the nation's improved airlift capabilities and the Army's greater strength and flexibility.



The operation was designated, "BIG LIFT."

## PRE-POSITIONED EQUIPMENT AT STAGING AREAS



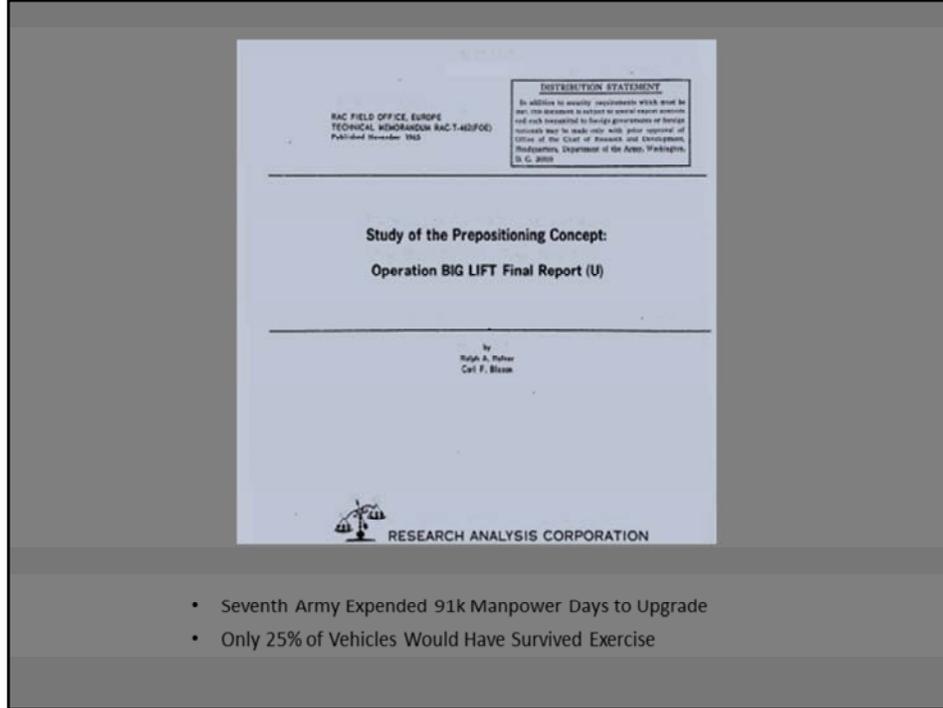
Even while the final plans were being drawn up in Washington, USAREUR had begun its own preparations. A 500-man group charged with maintaining 2d Armored's pre-positioned equipment, began comprehensive inspections, road tests, repairs and a restructuring of the collection. The group, however, was soon overwhelmed and Seventh Army had to come to its rescue providing it with about 600 additional personnel and about 6,000 items from its own stores.

## M48 PATTON MAIN BATTLE TANK



“ANCIENT VINTAGE”

By August, the preparations were complete. The pre-positioned fleet contained over 5,000 vehicles. None of them, however, were state-of-the-art; instead, most dated from the mid-1950s and were described in one report as "ancient vintage." Seventh Army, however, had been directed to bring the equipment up to its own more rigorous readiness standards, and it expended nearly 91,000 extra days of manpower to do so.



According to a 1964 study, only a quarter of the vehicles would have made it through the exercise without this added effort.



Preparations prior to the 1st AD shortly before Big Lift was announced.



U.S. UNITS

ADD

PERSONNEL

Stateside preparations began early as well. In August, senior leaders from 2d Armored traveled to Europe to coordinate plans, and the division, which had been scheduled to lose 2,000 personnel, beefed-up by 4,000 to near full strength. The 6 support units scheduled to go added 600 men as well.



By late September, the pace of activity at Fort Hood increased. Troops underwent intensive instruction in everything from German language and culture to international relations and escape and evasion techniques. They also busily prepped their vehicles for storage, packed their personal gear and winter clothing, and received all necessary inoculations. To help vehicle operators pass USAREUR certification tests, German road-signs were placed alongside English ones throughout the installation.



**BIG LIFT DETAILS  
REVEALED  
8 OCTOBER 1963**



UNITS & PUBLIC

To create the semblance of a genuine emergency, the units involved first learned the exact dates and details of BIG LIFT along with the general public on 8 October.

# FORT HOOD ESTABLISHES

PRESS CAMP



One of the busiest places at Fort Hood in the days preceding Big Lift, was the press camp at the Main Sports Arena.

MOVEMENT CONTROL CENTER



A Movement Control Center launched into actual operation in the second week of October. To the MCC would fall the massive job of coordinating the intricate timetables involved in transporting the men of the division from Fort Hood to three Texas airfields, and then airlifting the men to Germany.

Thereafter, preparations at Fort Hood reached a fevered pitch. The installation quickly established a Movement Control Center to coordinate all ground transportation and it converted its sports arena to a press center to handle a crush of reporters. To prepare for the eventuality of a real emergency during the operation, commands on both sides of the Atlantic, hurriedly drafted contingency plans indicating how BIG LIFT forces would be integrated into existing war-plans.

**500-Man Advance Team, 2d Armored  
Arrive in Germany  
19 October 1963**



With these herculean efforts, preparations for BIG LIFT were completed by October 18. The next day, shortly after midnight, an advance team of 500 people from the 2d Armored set off in 7 of the latest model C-135 jet transports for 10-hour flights to Europe. With Seventh Army's help, the team swiftly established a command post, prepared the pre-positioned equipment, and inventoried each item so that the main force could begin, as their commander described it, "at a dead run."



Back at Fort Hood, the troops began shuttling to local airbases in a procession of 70 chartered buses, some making several round trips over a 2 day period. The 2d Armored's commander, key staff-members, a coterie of reporters, and 4,000 other fortunate souls flew in C-135s. The remainder packed with their personal weapons and gear into less commodious propeller-planes, which made the trip in about 30 hours. On the tarmac in Texas, temperatures in these planes reached 110 degrees.

FRESH

NOT SO FRESH !



According to one report, the men who flew the C-135s were "considerably fresher," than their colleagues in the propeller planes.



# STEAK & FRENCH FRIES!



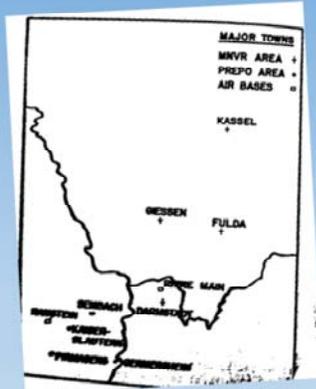
Upon arrival, each soldier received a steak and French fry dinner.

## 2D ARMORED'S COMMANDER CUTS CAKE



And, the 2d Armored's commander took the first cut at the tank-shaped cake with a bayonet.

## PRE-POSITION SITES



## OPERATIONAL CONTROL— SEVENTH ARMY



Following their meal, there was little time to rest. Within 90 minutes of their arrival, the soldiers were loaded onto trucks to begin the trek to the pre-position sites, some up to 5 hours away. In Europe, the ground forces came under operational control of Seventh Army, which was responsible for transporting them and helping them ready the equipment.

## BIVOACING & PREPPING EQUIPMENT



At the storage sites the men busied themselves conducting final checks of the equipment, loading live ammunition...

## SOLDIERS STUDY MAPS OF GERMANY



and preparing themselves, for the field exercises. The effort went so smoothly that the entire division was ready to begin the field exercise nearly 2 days early. This marked the end of the Strategic Mobility portion of BIG LIFT.



Secretary McNamara considered BIG LIFT a BIG SUCCESS. Even before the field exercise had begun, he directed the Joint Chiefs to begin planning for additional exercises, including a full 2-division airlift to Europe.

## PRESIDENT KENNEDY WITH THE JOINT CHIEFS



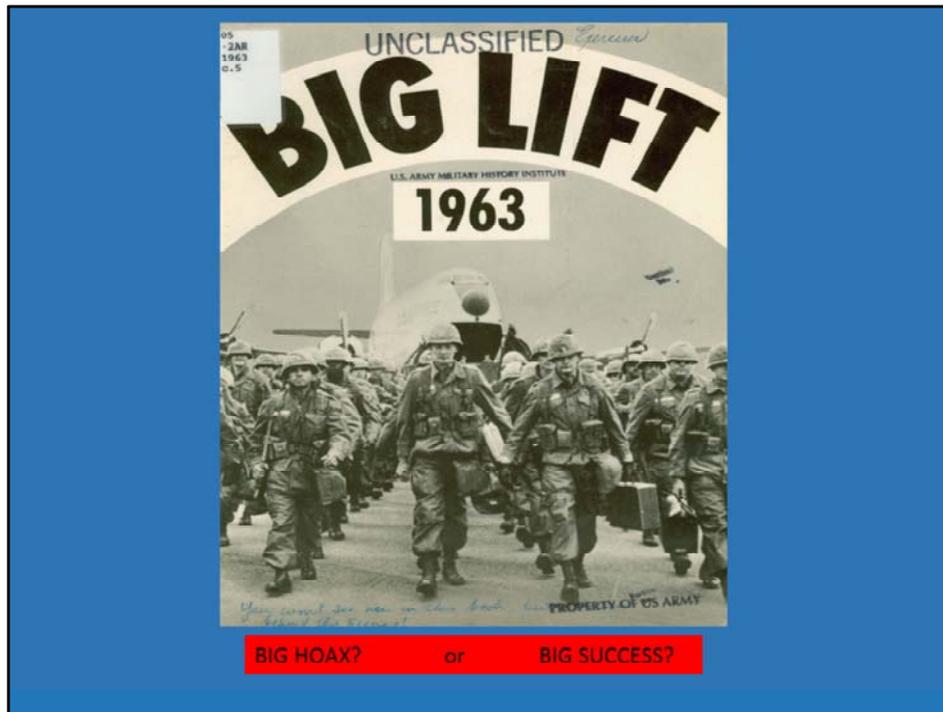
Many military leaders, however, were more guarded in their assessments. While most believed that BIG LIFT demonstrated the great potential of Strategic Mobility, they felt the model needed significant modifications. Most concerning was the extensive manpower that Seventh Army had to put into preparing the pre-positioned equipment. The debate, however, remained unresolved in the short-term. Because of fiscal issues and the demands of the Vietnam War, the U.S. was unable to stage another mass airlift to Europe until REFORGER in 1969. But, thereafter, the concepts developed during BIG LIFT became the foundation of U.S. war-plans for the continent.

Gen Paul L. Freeman  
Commander, U.S. Army,  
Europe 1962-1965



**BIG LIFT=BIG HOAX**

But, even by this point not everyone had been convinced of Strategic Mobility's viability. In a 1974 interview, for example, General Paul Freeman, USAREUR's commander during BIG LIFT, called it McNamara's 'BIG HOAX,' arguing that without the capability to airlift heavy equipment and soldiers the model was unsound.



Fortunately for the U.S., though, a big test of the BIG HOAX never occurred.