The crash of the chartered DC-8 in Gander, Newfoundland, in late December with 248 soldiers of the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) was a tragedy that shook most in the military. In the Guard, that loss touched us with the death of SGT John Millen, son of COL Lewis Millen (ret.), one of the six National Guard Medal of Honor recipients we honored last fall in Washington, D.C., and Louisville, Kentucky. John was a former Tennessee Guardsman.

This crash has been followed by questions from concerned civilians to the effect of "why, in heaven's name, with all the airlift capability in the Air Force, do we fly soldiers overseas on chartered aircraft no one has ever heard of?" It's a good question, with a good enough answer from the Military Air Command (MAC) and from Pentagon leaders.

Having asked the question, moreover, it gives us the opportunity to say why more airlift is needed at the same time as we explain why chartered aircraft—given certain conditions—are still a good buy for the Defense dollar for the transportation of personnel.

What the tragic crash of the Arrow Air DC-8 demonstrates, among other things, is that the public believes the Air Force has an enormous fleet of airliners, when it actually does not. Further, although money is being spent on airlift procurement, and although research and development of the proposed C-17 is on track, the fact remains that a large number of aircraft have not been bought in the past 10-20 years. Quite the contrary, which is the reason why what we can do so much military business.

Because of the constraint on procurement dollars both in the past and currently, the Air Force decided to concentrate on airlift of equipment. That was the heart of the debate in 1981 and 1982 between procurement of additional C-141s and procurement of Boeing 747s. The C-5B won, and it is in production. It won on its merits because it can carry a very large payload, and it can accommodate "outsize" cargo, which is cargo that won't fit through an ordinary aircraft door: a tank or large truck, or fully assembled helicopter.

Aircraft like the Boeing 747 have traveled on one think it is a wonderful way to traverse long distances comfortably. The same can be said of the DC-10. However, both were designed as people-movers. They are not well suited to accommodate equipment.

As the dollars available, the Air Force opted to contract for transport of people, and move the equipment on the MAC-owned aircraft. When deploying to overseas exercises like ROGERFIST or to BRIGHT STAR in the Middle East last summer, a mix of C-141/C-5A and chartered DC-8s and DC-10s was utilized. The equipment went on the Air Force aircraft. The labor went by charter. Indeed, some Army Guardsmen went to BRIGHT STAR on Air Air. Other companies often the pre sent policy hasn't been said where they plan to find the money to do that, however.

Yet, whether or not people-mover aircraft are bought for MAC, the fact remains that the economic argument of all types remains seriously short. Any one who works regularly with the 100th Airlift Squadron, transport of people is a task that requires a lot of coordination and support for those operations are seriously constrained by the lack of airlift. All too often, the Air Guard's "aircraft-buying" date is determined mostly by the constraints of the TPFDL and not by any shortfall in training.

The Air Lift Task Force of the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS) supports the Air Force's decision to concentrate on bringing the C-17 into production. A study in schedule in about five years. Forty-eight of those C-17s are to go to the Air Guard directly from production at McDonnell Douglas simultaneously with their issue to the active Air Force. The NGAUS also supports continued procurement of the C-130H. The oldest C-130s—the A-models—are nearly 30 years old and need to be replaced.

However, the basic C-130 aircraft remains a good short-haul, intratheater, relatively slow-moving cargo-hauler for the tactical, short-runway mission. A C-130 isn't of much use going overseas, of course.

What is most on the minds of the military passengers these days, however, is maintenance, not whether the present policy between MAC aircraft or charter should be changed. These passengers know that MAC maintenance standards are high; MAC planes rarely crash.

All of us are uncomfortable when MAC technicians are inspecting the maintenance of the charter firms who are contracting with the Army and Air Force. And when MAC maintenance standards are being enforced on the charter operators.

Maintenance policy is based on a statistical formulation that shows that equipment failures begin to escalate at very low points. The prudent perform a major maintenance procedure at that point or before. The unregulated marketplace—and what is the airline business is today for all practical purposes—might have the temptation to push the statistical norms.

That saves money. MAC doesn't save money that way, and when its philosophy of maintenance is enforced, continued use of charters will be supported.

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