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# T-28s In The Congo – Part 2: Heyday of the Trojan

By Leif Hellström



A T-28B (left) and a T-28C (right, with nose strakes) make a low pass over the Paulis airfield in mid 1965. On the ground is T-28B FA-260, carrying the name "LEON" on the canopy frame and the first version of the "Makasi" badge on the nose. (Jan Hekker)

**Part 1 of this article (see *Aeromilitaria*, September 2014) covered the initial period of the T-28's history in the Congo, up to March 1965.**

In May 1965, a further three replacement aircraft were received. Uniquely, these were T-28Bs: the only such aircraft sent to the Congo. From an operational point of view, they had the same performance and capabilities as the de-navalized T-28Cs and were used interchangeably in the FAC. This brought the strength back up to twelve T-28s again - but only temporarily.

One of the T-28Bs had a very short life-span in the Congo, as it turned out. On 29 May, Roger Bracco, most likely in T-28B FA-111, and Luis de la Guardia, flying T-28C FA-476, set off from Paulis to support an army unit in trouble north-west of there.

*It shouldn't have been any problem. We were to fly to Titule, get in touch by radio, do the job and come right back. But then it happened that one of the officers was Bracco's personal friend. So they started talking. And they said, do this, do that - I can understand a little bit of French and they were speaking in French all the time. We fired a few rockets at the positions they told us.*

*After you fired the first two rockets, it went silent for a while. But now they started to get mortar fire again. So obviously they are still there: the rockets didn't do it. So then they talk and talk... I am giving Bracco protection, he is flying low trying to pinpoint the place where the mortars were firing from and I'm riding*

*above at around 3,500 feet, to see if there is any fire against him. Of course the rebels, they knew. They saw the other airplane just loitering above and said, 'Don't make any smoke, because if you do that guy up there is going to come right down on us!'*

*He loitered for a while and I interrupted*



Rare view of the underside of one of the FAC T-28Cs, showing the speed brake to good effect. Aircraft FA-477 was one of the few to carry national insignia on the wings. (Luis de la Guardia)



Above: A cluttered scene from the WIGMO hangar at N'Djili airport in May 1965, as one of the new T-28Bs (BuNo 138153) is being readied for operations. Behind it, a B-26B is being dismantled for parts. (Jan Hekker)



Above: Label from a bottle of "Makasi" beer, which stood model for the bull emblem used on the CIA T-28s and other aircraft types.



Above: As the recruitment of Cuban exile pilots picked up the pace in the USA, the CIA hired a T-28A with civilian instructor to make check rides in Miami. This was the only T-28A associated with the Congo in any way. This colorized black-and-white photo clearly shows why the aircraft was nicknamed "The Parrot". (via Fred Flaquer)



Above: One T-28D and three T-28Cs at the Albertville airfield, with Lake Tanganyika in the background. At most airfields, servicing had to be performed outdoors. The T-28s carry a mix of intermediate and large "Makasi" badges. (via Michel Huart)



Above: FG-563 was one of the initial three T-28Ds delivered to the Congo. All were of the T-28D-5 version, with ammunition storage inside the wing. Unlike the T-28Bs and 'Cs, most of the T-28Ds were finished in overall USAF Gray. The aircraft is seen over Lake Tanganyika and carries the final, large version of the "Makasi" badge. Note the crudely over-painted USAF serial. (Terry Peet)



Above: The modest airport terminal at Albertville in 1965, with four T-28s on the apron. The extensive fuel dump is clearly visible. (Larry Murphy)



CIA Air Operations Officer Larry Murphy (left) gives General Mobutu and other Congolese officials a close look at one of the T-28Cs. (via Larry Murphy)



Above: Nice air-to-air view of FG-516, unusually carrying a passenger. (Eugenio Papotti)



A T-28 (circled) is seen shooting up a column of rebel trucks in a small town in northern Congo. Note the smoke plumes from the rockets behind the aircraft.  
(Joaquin Varela)

him a couple of times, saying 'We'd better do this. If they need us to give them fire cover, we can do that while they move out of the area. If that's what they want to do, but it is getting late.' We left [Paulis] about 2.30 in the afternoon. By the time we got there it was about 3.40. And we started flying around and flying around. Of course when you are flying at 'cruise power' it is a different story than when you have 'military power', which burns a lot of fuel. But even so. I told Bracco that, since we left, it had been two and a half hours and we barely had time to get back. 'Yeah, yeah – five more minutes!'

OK, five more minutes. We talked to the people on the ground and they asked us to let go everything we had and then they would move out. At that time it was about 4.30-4.40 in the afternoon and darkness came about six. 'Bracco, it is time to go! Time to go!' 'OK, OK, we are going.' We let the rockets go first and then we said, 'Well, we still have the machine guns; OK, let's go with the machine guns while these guys move out.' On the last pass I got hit in the left wing. I said, 'Hey, Bracco! Something hit me!' Because I could see on top of the wing, an opening of some sort. He said, 'OK, I'll get down there.' He got underneath and said, 'Alright, yeah, you got a hit. It doesn't look too bad, you are just spilling a little bit of fuel.' The T-28 fuel tanks were like rubberized cells and if they got punctured they would tend to close and minimize the loss of fuel. But still. So we started flying back.

On the way back, the aircraft ran into thunderstorms, forcing a detour, and by the time they were 50 miles from base it was clear they were not going to make it. Bracco's aircraft ran out of fuel first and

then de la Guardia's engine started to splutter. He opened his canopy and prepared to jump, getting all his maps, weapons and gear together.

I had never jumped by parachute in my life, not even during training. It was just theory: this is what you do, you pull this, you do that... I jumped out the left side. I am going head first. And it is pitch black, right there. I saw the beacon on top of the vertical fin go by about ten feet away but luckily I didn't get hit.

I cleared the airplane and I started pulling on the D-ring. It seems like ages before it opens: you pull and you pull and where is the parachute? It takes a few seconds. Since I was coming head first, when it opened I flipped. And after the flip the harness stretched against the Uzi

on my front and almost broke my ribs!

I did see a flash at a distance. It could have been something else but I think it was the impact, when the aircraft hit the ground.

As I am coming down in the parachute, I look down. And when I had lightning go off three or four miles away, it would illuminate the whole area. I looked down and saw – 'Oh, my God! – it is all jungle, it is completely covered.'

Both pilots jumped successfully but got hung up in tall trees in the Ituri rain forest and injured themselves getting down to the ground. De la Guardia was spotted from the air and rescued by an army patrol while Bracco had to walk back to base through the bush, which took him about a week.

By the spring of 1965, the Simbas had been evicted from all major towns and were cut off from their main supply sources in the Sudan and Uganda. They



A USAF C-124 disgorging one of the first T-28Ds at N'Djili in September 1965. This was the last batch of T-28s for the FAC to arrive by air. (Jens Jensen)

still roamed relatively unchecked over an area roughly the size of France, however, most of it heavily wooded. The fighting on the ground was all near the roads: the ANC would not venture into the jungle. The main purpose of the T-28s was to prevent the *Simbas* from using vehicles or heavy equipment, or moving in strength in the open. Most of the missions were armed reconnaissance and the majority of these found no targets. The perimeter of the area held by the ANC would be shown on maps and anything the pilots found outside this – troops, vehicles, etc. – they could attack. If there was any doubt they could radio back for further instructions. A normal patrol was two T-28s but if there was something special on, four aircraft could be sent. They never operated singly.

A final modification to the armament appeared around this time. The standard LAU-32/A rocket pods were disposable, made largely out of cardboard, but some WIGMO mechanics constructed reusable operational pods out of metal parts from training pods. The pilots liked these because WIGMO built in a single-fire function, lacking in the standard pods. There was also some discussion of providing conventional and/or napalm bombs for the T-28s but this was vetoed on political grounds.

Apart from the north-east, the *Simbas* also held a large pocket of territory near Lake Tanganyika, which was somewhat erratically supplied by boat from Tanzania. There was still some risk of the rebels spreading south from there and from late April there were suggestions to move some T-28s to Albertville, to the south of the pocket, to help protect the town. From here they would also be well placed to operate against the Fizi-Baraka pocket, as it became known. In mid June 1965 the T-28s at Bunia relocated to Albertville, which henceforth became a permanent operational base of the T-28.

This was also the site of the headquarters for *Ops Sud*, which increasingly became the main operational area in the Congo. There were still four T-28s at Paulis and on occasion, Stanleyville would also be used as a temporary base.

There was never any real *Simba* activity near Leopoldville but now and then some small group of rebel sympathizers might cross over by boat from Congo-Brazzaville. Occasionally an aircraft would be sent out to check. Air Operations Officer 'Zip' Rausa vividly remembered seeing Chief Pilot Jack Varela go off on a reconnaissance:

*The first day I was on the job, out at N'Djili airport, a report came in from somewhere that there was some movement up north. They said, 'Jack, go ahead and take a look!' To me, that was hot-shot stuff. He came out with his Mae west, his gun and a bandolier strapped on, hops into a T-28 all by himself and takes off into the late afternoon. He went out for a half hour or so, came back and said, 'Nah, there's nothing going on up there.'*



*A couple of T-28s on patrol in mid 1965. Both still have the front covers in place on their LAU-32/A pods, indicating that no rockets have been fired. FA-516 has one segment of the rear cover in place while FA-485 has none; either way was common in the Congo. (Juan Peron)*



*The second delivery of T-28Ds arrived by ship, to the port of Boma. After being prepared on the dock side, they were lifted over the fence . . .*



*. . . before taxiing under their own power through town up to the local airfield, where the out wing panels were fitted before the aircraft were flown out. Aircraft 50-245, soon to be FG-245, is seen here. (both via Jan Hekker)*



T-28D FG-245 after being fully painted up in FAC markings, taxiing out for a mission at Albertville. In the background is a CIA Bell 47 helicopter. (Dick De Boer)



The last surviving FAC T-28B outside the WIGMO hangar at N'Djili airport, Kinshasa, after being repaired following its accident. It always flew a bit crooked after the rebuild, though. (Lars Carlsson)



A WIGMO mechanic carries out field maintenance of a T-28C in 1966. The removed cowling provides a good view of the engine installation. (Dick De Boer)



Four pilots of 210 Squadron in green flight suits together with a motley group of mechanics, in Stanleyville in June 1966, after the mercenaries had taken over the T-28s from the CIA air unit. (Herbert Lotz)



One of the two T-28s taken over by the mercenary mutineers in July 1967, hidden away under the trees near Punia airfield during the brief operations against the ANC. The aircraft had to be manhandled in and out of position. (Herbert Lotz)

Together with Leopoldville, Albertville was unusual in that it boasted two airfields. The old one, which was just a 1,000 m dirt strip, was in the town itself and at right angles to the lake shore, with the runway ending just metres from the water. The other, newer airfield was more of a proper airfield and its main runway was asphalted, 1,740 m long and parallel to the lake shore. It was easily large enough for B-26s and large transports, and even some jets. Uniquely for the Congo, there was also an intersecting runway, a 1,000 m dirt strip which mainly became used as a parking area.

The new airfield was some distance outside town and the CIA Air Operations Officer felt it would be more secure to use the old strip as a base. This was the indirect cause of the next T-28 accident, on 9 July 1965. That day Mário Ginebra was taking off towards the lake in FA-477 but on the take-off run the engine began running rough and he tried to abort. He ran off the end of the field and his wheels dug into the narrow, sandy beach, flipping the aircraft onto its back into the water. Normally take-offs at the old field would be made with open canopies for safety but the day was unusually dusty and Ginebra had closed up the canopy and he was therefore trapped inside the T-28. Many people on the field ran into the water to help but they were unable to get inside the cockpit and Ginebra drowned in the shallow water. The damaged aircraft was in due course taken to N'Djili and attempts were made to rebuild it. Meanwhile, all FAC flight operations moved to the new airfield and the old one fell into disuse.

From Albertville, the T-28s at times flew single aircraft patrols over the lake. The CIA operated a number of patrol boats on Lake Tanganyika which could be used for rescue missions, when needed, and there was usually also a CIA Bell 47 available for the same duty.

It was clear by mid 1965 that the *Simba* rebellion was waning, even if it would take some time to defeat completely. Already in 1964, Prime Minister Tshombe had expressed a wish to take over the T-28s and have them operated by South Africans or other mercenaries but at that time the Americans had not been interested. Now, however, they were beginning to look at ways of disengaging and by August 1965 they were proposing that the T-28s should be gradually turned over to either the mercenary 21 Squadron or a new unit sponsored by Belgium and crewed by Belgians. This was rejected by the Belgian Government later that autumn, for political and financial reasons. In the same vein, the CIA had an ambition of gradually replacing the Cuban pilots with those of other nationalities when possible, but this was slow work. Apart from the two Belgians hired earlier in 1965, only one other non-Cuban T-28 pilot was added during the year: a Frenchman by the name of Jacques Roques, who unusually had his wife with him in the Congo.

The following summaries from late July gives an idea of the type of missions flown from Albertville:

**22 Jul:** *Three T-28s flew visual recon from Bandera to Makunga and Lake Albert. No navigation was sighted on the lake.*

**23 Jul:** *One T-28 sortie in search of lost speed boat. [...] Two T-28 sorties were flown near Lubonga and on the Lubimba-Fizi road. Attacks were made on a town and mission 3 miles NE of Lulimba, known to be occupied by rebels. The attacks were at request of ANC. Another attack on Lubonga produced a fiery flash like oil or fuel burning. No enemy anti-aircraft fire encountered.*

**24 Jul:** *T-28s flew one sortie over Lake Albert and Lulimba. No enemy navigation was noted on the lake. Mission buildings NE of Lulimba and a village located 10 miles N of Bandera were strafed but no fires resulted.*

**25 Jul:** *T-28s flew one sortie at request of ANC to search for ANC advancing towards Mazomeno on way to Kamembare. No contact. Another sortie utilized T-28 and B-26 aircraft in armed recon around Kamembare, Kongolo and Pene Luenga. Attacks on Kamembare and Pene Luenga were requested by ANC. Small fires were observed in Kamembare.*

**28 Jul:** *T-28 flew recon of road Bendera-Lulimba-Fizi road. No activity.*

**29 Jul:** *Two T-28s flew cover for advancing column of 90 ANC [soldiers] and two trucks. Strafing roadside near Ramazini. Strafing two villages ahead of column on road to Kalunga-Mugalo at request of ANC.*

**30 Jul:** *Three T-28 sorties to Ramanzani, Kalunga-Mugalo, Bendera and Lulimba. No activity.*

**31 Jul:** *A T-28 flew recon on Kamembare, Kalunga-Mugalo road. Large warehouse, in rebel held area, was strafed and caught fire.*

The T-28s in Paulis during the same period only flew two missions, each with two T-28s, but found no targets.

In early 1965, the CIA still used a T-6 for check rides of newly recruited pilots in Miami, but with increasing numbers of recruits, a civilian T-28A (N9858C) of

Crescent Aviation was contracted for this purpose. Due to its gaudy green and orange colour scheme, it was nicknamed 'The Parrot' among the pilots. The T-28A had markedly poorer performance than the T-28B and 'C' but was still more appropriate for the job than a T-6.

Despite the decreased tempo of operations, the T-28 force was still over-extended, particularly as replacements for losses were usually lagging behind. In late August, the US Embassy in the Congo made a strong case for increasing the unit establishment from the current twelve, stating that 'the absolute minimum number of T-28s needed for air operations in the Congo is 15'. But although additional T-28s were available, the cost was seen as too high and nothing came of the request.

In September, three new aircraft were received as replacements for those lost in May and July. For the first time, the more up-to-date T-28D was sent to the Congo. More specifically, they were of the T-28D-5 version, with ammunition stowage inside the wing, requiring a much smaller under-wing pod for the gun. It was possible to fit more under-wing racks than on the T-28B/C but in the Congo the T-28D only ever carried one under each wing. The engine was a bit more powerful than on the T-28B/C and the cockpit somewhat modernized but as these T-28Ds were converted from US Air Force T-28As, they lacked the dive brakes of the US Navy versions. This was a handicap on ground attack missions since the speed built rapidly in a dive and some pilots preferred using the older T-28Cs instead.

As with the previous replacement batch, one of the new aircraft was to be very short-lived. A report by the Italian Air Mission summed it up:

*On 12 October 1965 in the vicinity of Kikwit, a T-28 aircraft piloted by a volunteer Cuban and part of a formation of three planes flying cross-country got separated from the formation in a storm. The pilot signalled by radio that he had become lost and subsequently that he had got into a spin. This was the last communication of the T-28.*

The pilot was Arturo Piqué, a new and relatively inexperienced pilot. He was flying T-28D number FG-559, which was destroyed in the crash, killing the pilot. (The FAC T-28 serial prefix changed from FA to FG in mid 1965, for reasons unknown - possibly related to some internal modification or upgrade.)

The campaign in the north continued to quieten down and from 20 September,

WIGMO did not only provide maintenance but also developed standard procedures for operations. This included various checklists for the pilots, including one for visual signals to use with the T-28s and B-26s. Here is a selection of the prescribed signals, presumably borrowed from some existing set of signals:

|                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| <i>Start engines</i>    | <i>Arm overhead with circular motion</i>     |
| <i>Loosen formation</i> | <i>Fishtail aircraft</i>                     |
| <i>Break up</i>         | <i>Pass lead - Blow kiss</i>                 |
| <i>Fuel check</i>       | <i>Thumb in mouth</i>                        |
| <i>Rough engine</i>     | <i>Tap chest and hold nose, point engine</i> |
| <i>Run-away gun</i>     | <i>Dip either wing twice</i>                 |
| <i>Gear down</i>        | <i>Fist closed thumb down</i>                |





Another one bites the dust... Belgian pilot Roger Bracco, with his arm in a sling, contemplates T-28B FG-260 which he overturned on take-off at Albertville in early February 1966. Despite the extensive damage (note position of engine) the aircraft was repaired by WIGMO. (Russ Gentry)

after only ten or so strikes had been made from Paulis in the previous six weeks, the T-28s there re-located to Goma on the north shore of Lake Kivu, close to the Rwandan border. This was another substantial airfield, with a 1,920 m asphalt runway at 1,520 m altitude. Both operational T-28 bases were now in the extreme east of the Congo, to the north and south of the Fizi-Baraka pocket which was the main rebel stronghold by this time, and were poised to support the amphibious landing against the area by the ANC, which began on 27 September. Over the following days six or even eight T-28s were sent out on support missions against the rebel positions in Baraka. Tony Blazquez, who was away at the time, was later told by his pilot colleagues about the operation:

*It was raining, low clouds. It was a disaster. I don't know how those people don't shot down several planes. Because they shoot the rockets the wrong way, in the wrong place - it was a disaster!*

Despite this, the landings were a success, but the rebels retained a stronghold in the area for a long time yet.

There is a photo from Goma in October 1965 which shows a sign on the wall of the operations hut that says '26th Attack Sqn (Light)'. This is the one and only piece of evidence that links any of the squadron designations to a specific detachment. The other three numbers would at this time presumably have referred to the training base at Leopoldville, the B-26 detachment at Stanleyville and the T-28 detachment at Albertville, but this is just guesswork.

The detachment at Goma was short-lived and after only two months its aircraft were transferred to Albertville,

which by late November thus was the only operational T-28 base. One of the aircraft was lost while the move was still under way, when the French pilot Jacques Roques crashed into Lake Tanganyika on 20 November 1965, while attacking some small boats. Rescue boats sent to the spot found no trace of the pilot and only some small pieces of the aircraft, T-28B number FG-153. There was speculation about the aircraft being shot down but, once again, misjudgement by the pilot was a more likely explanation.

Even after this accident, there were eight T-28s based at Albertville by early December: the largest concentration ever in the Congo, particularly as Albertville was often also home to one or two B-26s. But this was only a temporary arrangement and from the middle of the month there were normally four to six T-28s at Albertville, on and off also two or three aircraft at Stanleyville, and the balance of the T-28s (up to four) in Leopoldville. This approximate distribution of the T-28s was to remain unchanged throughout 1966.

It was probably around this time, soon after General Mobutu had taken power as President of the Congo, that the Belgian pilots Bracco and Libert were approached by a Belgian civilian who turned up at the airfield on a bicycle one day. He proposed that they should kill Mobutu to support a plot to restore Tshombe to power, by firing rockets into the stands during an upcoming air power demonstration by the T-28s. It never went further than discussions, however.

In January 1966, the Congolese Air Force was reorganized anew and the CIA aircraft now made up 22 Wing: the English designation seems to have been

used officially, rather than a French one. Again, the Wing was just a paper formation, without any commander or HQ staff, but the name actually became rather widely used among the crews and in documents. The US Air Attaché noted that,

*This new name is more to facilitate conversation about these units than anything else. Also, it tends to identify the units with the Congolese AF in a more normal way than to call them 'WIGMO' or any of several other euphemisms.*

The wing comprised - on paper only - five squadrons, basically one for each aircraft type used by the CIA in the Congo. The T-28s now all belonged to 220 Tactical Squadron, but this name was never used in practice.

By late 1965, the T-28 pilots each flew around 80 hours per month. As the new year progressed, the operational pace slowed down even further and by the middle of the year things were fairly quiet, even if armed reconnaissance missions continued to be flown regularly and strikes were carried out now and then, usually against minor targets. But if you wanted to fly, you always could, and some pilots would take a T-28 out for an hour or two to play around chasing zebras or training aerobatics. Sometimes they would also train dog fighting with the T-28s. 'Having fun, like young pilots do: "I'll meet you at 10,000 feet, *mano a mano*." You'd fight and play and have fun, and sharpen your skills.' Some of the Cubans were former fighter pilots, having flown Sea Furies and other types, and the others found them hard to beat. One day in Albertville, Leon Libert got into an argument with Tony Blasquez about who was the better pilot and they

decided to slug it out in T-28s. 'He "shot me down" I don't know how many times,' Libert recalled. 'This guy was a good, good pilot.'

There were occasionally also missions which can only be described as 'unusual,' as this one described by Tom Baldwin, one of the CIA Air Officers:

*One time, I got word in the Congo that a bunch of pygmies were starving. [...] I got a Frenchman to fly one of the T-28s, and I said, 'I'll take the helicopter and herd a bunch of elephants into this village, you shoot them with the T-28, and there'll be food enough for everybody.'*

*Sure enough, he did. I took a helicopter, found the herd of elephants and got them close enough that he could fly over with a T-28 and a rocket, and shoot an elephant or two. When I landed, I saw one of the pygmies in the gut of the elephant, chopping out the heart from the inside of the damn thing, because they're small enough they could do this.*

The U.S. Government in early February 1966 once again failed to persuade the Belgian Government to assume responsibility for the tactical air support program and there was grumbling in Washington about 'the seemingly endless assistance' provided through the CIA. But everyone in the US Embassy in Leopoldville, from Ambassador to CIA Chief of Station, were unanimous that, 'without air support, the Congolese effort against the rebels would evaporate' and Washington grudgingly agreed to extend the operation yet again. However, the recruitment of non-Cubans now got under way in earnest and gradually the T-28 unit was joined by a few pilots from South Africa, one or two additional Belgians and Frenchmen, and the odd one from England, New Zealand, Italy and even Chile. The Cubans remained in a majority, though. There was still not a single operational Congolese pilot in the FAC, despite some of them having been

in training for several years by this time.

The T-28 strength was reduced further still on 5 (or possibly 6) February, when Roger Bracco pranged T-28B number FG-260 at Albertville, after he forgot to select rich mixture on take-off. The T-28 turned over on its back and Bracco had to be dug out from the cockpit, only to be promptly dismissed by the CIA. The aircraft was taken to Leopoldville for repairs and did not fly again until July. This situation did not go unnoticed in Washington and a memorandum for the Joint Chiefs of Staff on 11 March noted that:

*[Of] the 12 T-28s in the program, 2 were lost, one was being repaired after a crash, 2 were out of commission for maintenance in Leopoldville, 2 were being used for pilot training in Leopoldville and only 5 were operational at Albertville. I assume that with a normal in-commission rate no more than 3 or 4 of these aircraft are available at any one time. This is a pitifully weak force for a country the size of the Congo.*

That same month, March, two more T-28D-5s were received as attrition replacements, by ship to the Boma harbour near the Atlantic coast. The aircraft were prepared and the engines run up right there at the docks and were then taxied, minus their outer wings, through the town up to the airfield where the wings were attached. There were no more aircraft deliveries that year, even though the MAP budget allowed for three T-28s to be delivered in both Fiscal Year 1966 and FY 1967. On the positive side, there were no further losses either in 1966.

A US report in April 1966 proposed that the T-28s should be handed over to the mercenary 210 (formerly 21) Squadron. The Department of Defence followed this up with an extensive air operations survey performed in the Congo during May. This concluded that the air support capability was critical to the continued ANC operations and

suggested that the FAC should have one 'fighter squadron' of T-6s and another of T-28s, each with twelve aircraft. The T-28s were proposed to be deployed as follows:

|                 |                         |
|-----------------|-------------------------|
| Stanleyville:   | 4 T-28s and Squadron HQ |
| Coquilhatville: | 4 T-28s                 |
| Bukavu:         | 2 T-28s                 |
| Bunia:          | 2 T-28s                 |

The proposed use of Coquilhatville was rather surprising, since this city was located in the far west, a long way from any military threats at the time. It was a regular staging-post on cross-country flights but never a regular FAC base. At any rate, these proposals did not lead to any immediate changes.

Many of the major cities in the Congo were named after colonial personalities and in May 1966 the Congolese Government decided to change their names to more African ones. Thus Leopoldville became Kinshasa, Stanleyville became Kisangani, Albertville became Kalemie, Paulis became Isiro and Coquilhatville became Mbandaka. Further renaming followed over the next couple of years. The old names continued in general use for a long time, but for consistency the new ones will be used below.

The damaged FG-260 was returned to service by the summer and this marked the beginning of the only extended period when the CIA unit actually had twelve T-28s in service, as authorized. It was only in the last weeks of 22 Wing the following year that this finally changed again.

Now that the operations against the Simbas were winding down, President Mobutu decided to rid the ANC of all soldiers from the Katanga province, since he saw them as a potential political threat. They were all based in the north and they now ceased to be paid, and there was talk of having them disarmed.



WIGMO mechanics with an army escort recovering the remains of T-28C FA-496 from its crash site in northern Congo, two years after it ran out of fuel and belly-landed. The battered tail section was left at a nearby road, with a message for the locals. (Rudy Kömer)

The Katangese commanders made a plan to move south into Katanga and on 23 July, they took over large parts of Kisangani (formerly Stanleyville). This was still used as a base by 22 Wing but the detachment in the city was allowed to leave after a couple of days. Since Kalemie (Albertville) was in Katanga, and the loyalty of the troops in the town was uncertain, all the aircraft and personnel there moved to Luluabourg a few days later, but returned to Kalemie in early August. The detachment then remained in Kalemie but was ready to evacuate again at first sign of trouble.

The US Government was hesitant how to handle the crisis, being uncertain on whether President Mobutu was worth supporting further. It was reluctantly decided that he should be assisted and in late August the following directive was issued:

- a) *Use of US controlled aircraft authorized to deter or, if necessary, attack Katangan units if their actions represent clear and present danger to authority of central government.*
- b) *Such action should only be taken at direct request President Mobutu.*

There was a stand-off in Kisangani for two months while negotiations were going on but on 23 September the ANC re-captured Kisangani airport. A part of the Katangese force then set out towards the capital of Katanga province, some 1,700 km away, and over the next few weeks the CIA aircraft carried out reconnaissance and strikes against the column. The US commitment to this operation was low and so was that of many of the pilots. Some of them would fire off their rockets and bullets into the bush rather than attack the Katangese, whom they considered 'good guys' compared to the rest of the ANC. But several T-28 attacks were made, including one that could have ended rather badly for its pilot, as recounted by Amado Cantillo:

*There were pilots who, if they had to shoot, would shoot from 5,000 feet: their ammunition would hit the target - if they hit anything - by gravity! But, being a young man, I went down on the deck all the time.*

*I was strafing a column of Katangese trucks, going from Kindu back to Katanga. They were on a narrow road, with big trees on both sides. I had already fired my rockets, and I came in strafing with .50 calibre machine-guns. The Katangese were leaving the trucks: usually we gave them a chance to leave, since we didn't want to kill them unless we had to.*

*When I pulled up, I found I hadn't locked my seat... I don't know how many Gs I pulled but - BOOM - the seat went down! I tell you, I almost fainted: I thought I had been hit by a cannon. Not only did it scare the hell out of me, but I couldn't see! Then my training took over so I rolled it, trying to get my bearings. My wingman was shouting, 'What happened?!' while I was holding the stick, trying to pull that seat up... Finally,*

*I don't know how, I managed to get it up to more or less where I wanted it. It was one of the scariest things that ever happened to me. Since then, I always check before take-off and don't let anyone touch the locks of my seat: I have learnt my lesson!*

The Katangese column was eventually stopped by the ANC but the hesitant performance of 22 Wing did not go unnoticed by the Congolese and led to a severe diplomatic crisis between Congo and the USA. In October, Mobutu demanded that full control of the T-28s be handed over to the Congo Government. Many in the US Government were also getting fed up with the whole operation and the old proposal to hand over the aircraft to 210 Squadron and replacing the CIA pilots with mercenaries was dusted off. On 4 November 1966, the decision was taken in Washington to disengage from the FAC. There were some discussions around this time of withdrawing the T-28s completely from the Congo, as CIA Chief of Station Larry Devlin recalled:

*I had a knock-down and drag-out argument with George Bundy, when he was National Security Advisor. He wanted to pull the T-28s out, and send them to Laos. I said, 'You pull the T-28s out and the [Congolese] government will collapse.'*

The idea of a removing the T-28s was finally dropped but, apart from various practical problems, a major American concern was for the Congolese to hire a competent commander to direct the continued operations, once the CIA officers left. In the end, a Turkish major-general named Surat Eraybar, formerly Commander of NATO's Air Forces South, was taken on as 'Air Advisor' and took up his duties in early February 1967. The same month, 210 Squadron ceased T-6 operations and its pilots began to be converted onto the T-28 by the CIA pilots. It was hoped that the Italian Air Mission would take a hand in the continued training and there was even an offer to turn over two T-28s to the Italians for training use. But due to disagreements between the Italians and General Eraybar over the FAC command structure, the Italian instructors were withdrawn from the program in late March.

Meanwhile, some T-28 operations continued, mainly in Kalemie. By this time, a detachment of four to six T-28s could be based on any useable airfield in the Congo within 30 hours of being called upon and there were special fly-away kits in readiness for any such move. The main problem was fuel, which had to be airlifted to most airfields in drums.

In late March, 22 Wing suffered its last loss. Cuban pilot Alberto Perez had to jump from his T-28 some 50 km north of Kalemie, due to engine failure. When Perez pulled the cord, the D-ring came loose in his hand: he was almost down in the trees when he found the cable and pulled it. Despite this, he survived with only a twisted ankle. The aircraft was T-28D number FG-563, which had had

fuel pressure problems when flown by another pilot on 20 March. This was in fact the only T-28 loss to date that could be directly attributed to a technical malfunction, which speaks highly of the work done by WIGMO and its mechanics. The T-28 serviceability rate was generally about 90 per cent.

The CIA T-28 pilots were offered continued employment with 210 Squadron and a few took up the offer, but none of the Cubans did since they could not reach an agreement on terms comparable to those previously given by the CIA. In all, some ten pilots of 210 Squadron were checked out in the T-28 and on 24 April 1967 the Americans formally handed over the T-28s to the Congolese in a small ceremony. The CIA Air Operations Officers all left but there were still some Belgians at FAC headquarters. WIGMO also remained to take care of the maintenance, but now under Congolese contract (albeit still initially with US funding).

There was also some discussion of WIGMO hiring pilots, as they already did for the military C-46s. One or two of the more proficient Congolese student pilots had been given a little training on the T-28 by the CIA instructors in early 1967 and were now confident that they could handle anything. The Italian instructors were arguing that their pupils were not ready - 'Congolese pilots completely lack discipline and believe themselves above the rules' - and were consequently accused of being racist by the trainees. The Italian chief instructor rather cynically remarked to a Belgian colleague that, 'It would only take two or three crashed Congolese pilots for the rest to return to their senses.' It would not be long before his prediction was to be tested. Meanwhile, the intention was still to have the Congolese pilots deployed to 210 Squadron once ready.

Very quickly, 210 Squadron lost one of its new aircraft when T-28D number FG-543 went missing near N'Djili on 10 May, while on a training flight. After a considerable search effort the wreck was found in a swamp near the Congo River by a helicopter. Both the pilot, Englishman Peter Wicksteed, and a South African passenger, Desmond 'Ginger' Parker, were killed. As always, there were various theories concerning the cause of the crash. One was that they had tried to do a loop and had got the speed or altitude wrong, another was that the stick lock, used when the aircraft was parked, had somehow engaged in the air. There was also a rather wild rumour that Wicksteed - who had served in the Katangan Air Force some years previously - was really back in the Congo to enlist supporters for a come-back coup by former Prime Minister Tshombe and that the crash was due to sabotage by political enemies.

At the third anniversary of the T-28's entry into service in the Congo there were therefore ten operational T-28s left: one T-28B, six T-28Cs and three T-28D-5s, plus some salvaged wrecks being worked upon. This meant that of the 22 T-28s delivered to date, 55 % had



*Busy scene at Albertville, with aircraft being rearmed and refueled between missions. Note the large fuel filter used when filling up FG-282. (Lars Carlsson)*

been lost, or at least been put out of commission for a very long period.

By this time there had been a minor technical modification of a few of the ex US Navy T-28s, which had been given T-28D type propellers instead of the stubbier navy model. Since they had the larger nose wheel, this was not a problem. This applied initially to FG-260 and FG-485 but it seems that by the late 1960s most if not all surviving T-28Cs had been fitted with T-28D propellers.

During the early summer of 1967, 210 Squadron continued to fly operations with the T-28s and but they were plagued by a pilot shortage, by poor morale and by indifferent leadership. Some pilots logged considerable flying hours, though, with one South African racking up 81 hours in May and a massive 148 hours in June. There was sometimes 'padding' of the flying hours reported, though, since some of the pay was related to flying time, and also to build up 'experience' to show future employers. From Kalemie, there were still regular patrols over Lake Tanganyika to stop smuggling to the remaining rebels and supporting missions for the ANC in the Fizi-Baraka pocket. The pilots seldom found any real targets but since they received extra payment for strike missions, it was not uncommon to fire off the ordnance into the bush or the lake and report fictitious attacks on return to base. One or two mercenary pilots also made a habit out of attacking any boat found on the lake, even if they were clearly local fishing boats.

In June 1967, the unit was deployed as follows:

|            |         |          |
|------------|---------|----------|
| Kinshasa:  | 2 T-28s | 2 pilots |
| Kisangani: | 4 T-28s | 2 pilots |
| Kalemie:   | 4 T-28s | 2 pilots |

The whole situation changed completely on 5 July 1967, when the mercenaries of the army forces in Kisangani mutinied and quickly took over the city, under command of Colonel Schramme. This was in response to an imminent disbandment of their units by the Congolese. Two of the T-28s had been flown to Kinshasa a few days before for maintenance but there were still two aircraft in place: T-28B number

FG-260 and T-28C serial FG-485. Together with their two Belgian pilots and a small WIGMO detachment, the T-28s were pressed into service by the mutineers. The air force personnel were not really volunteers but in fact had little choice but to join up with the mercenaries for protection; had they tried to leave or remain behind when the mutineers moved out later they would most likely have been killed by the Congolese. The T-28s of the 'mutineer air force' had their national insignia painted out and were then used for attacks against the ANC around Kisangani, but only one aircraft at the time. One of the first missions was to blow up the fuel depot across the river, where the ANC troops were grouped. The aircraft flew 'nearly day and night' for the next few days to create panic among the ANC, who had the utmost respect for the T-28. Most missions were flown by the Belgian pilot Jean 'Peppone' Peraux.

Meanwhile, the mutiny had repercussions for the aircrews elsewhere in the country. Those in Kinshasa were immediately arrested and put in jail, but thanks to the intervention by some Belgian officers they were not harmed, while almost all army mercenaries unlucky to be in the capital were killed by the ANC. The pilots in Kalemie proclaimed their loyalty to the Congolese Government and were left in freedom although closely supervised by Congolese soldiers. There were still four T-28s in the town and they were ferried from the new airfield to the old one in town, to be more easily controlled. All mercenaries, excluding those of WIGMO, were dismissed by government decree on 10 July and this marked the end of 210 Squadron's brief involvement with the T-28, and indeed the end of the squadron itself. The crews in Kalemie were flown to Kinshasa in a Congolese crewed C-47, under guard, and after a couple of days in jail were expelled with the other squadron members. The aviation part of the Belgian military mission, which had operated the FAC C-47s, was also dismissed.

The only pilots left in the FAC by late July were the Italians of the flying school, a few transport pilots with WIGMO, the

American pilots of the presidential VC-47, the Congolese trainees - and General Eraybar, the 57-year-old Turkish Air Advisor, who had been checked out in the T-28 and had famously belly-landed twice in the process; this was actually not too serious in the T-28B and 'C, since the gun pods would take the brunt of the damage. Eraybar had at first also been ordered to leave but by special dispensation had been allowed to remain. Since the Italian instructors refused to fly on operations, and none of the others were qualified on the T-28, Eraybar was in practice the only potentially combat-ready pilot on the government side. A few of the ex-CIA Cubans had, however, stayed on in the Congo as civilian pilots with Air Congo and on 13 July the Congolese government tried to draft three of them back into the FAC. One of them was former T-28 and B-26 pilot René García:

*For a moment I almost was involved in that thing because some irresponsible bastard in the [US] embassy told the government that, 'Don't you remember that Garcia is flying?' I was a nice, respectable airline captain now, flying safe and making good money. All of a sudden I found myself collecting parachutes and pistols and helmets and malaria pills...*

But García and the other Cubans had no desire to fight against the mercenaries, many of whom they knew personally, so they stalled things and in the end managed to avoid taking part in any T-28 operations.

The mutineers moved out of Kisangani on 12 July and started moving south-east. They reached Punia which became their new base for a short while. The two T-28s and a C-47 were flown down to the airfield at Punia and made a few sorties from there. To keep them safe between missions, against any possible attacks from the air and also against the reconnaissance carried out by USAF C-130s, the T-28s were hidden in the jungle bordering the airfield when not in use. This entailed lifting up the aircraft and manhandling them bodily into the forest, and then reversing the procedure to get them out. After a few days the meagre fuel supply ran out and the aircraft became useless. Before the mercenary column moved out of Punia on 2 August, the two T-28s were therefore blown up to prevent the FAC from recovering them. Their machine guns were salvaged to be mounted on vehicles. The pilots and WIGMO crews went with the column towards Bukavu, which was captured on 9 August. Since Bukavu still had no airfield, and Kamembe in Rwanda was by now out of bounds to both mercenaries and Congolese, the T-28s could not have been brought even if there had been more fuel available.

For the first time since 1964, at this point there was not a single T-28 on combat operations in the Congo.

*(To be continued; an aircraft list will be included in the last part of this article)*