

MEMORANDUM

March 20, 1997

To: Jeremy Gunn
cc: David Marwell; Christopher Barger; Joseph Masih; Christopher Hahn;
Douglas Horne

From: Tim Wray

Subject: Close Out Memo — Operation Big Lift

Purpose of Project. The purpose of this project was to assemble as much information as possible about (1) the air movement of U.S. troops on November 22, 1963, as part of Operation “Big Lift”; and (2) general information about the scope and schedule of Operation “Big Lift.”

Relevance to Kennedy Assassination. In the Oliver Stone motion picture *JFK*, Stone has a long expository segment in which “Mr. X” [Donald Sutherland] lays out for New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison [Kevin Costner] a scenario suggesting that President Kennedy’s assassination on November 22, 1963, was part of a much larger plot. “Many strange things were happening that day,” says X, “and Lee Harvey Oswald had nothing to do with them.” One of the “strange things” listed by X is that “we had a third of a combat division returning from Germany in the air above the United States at the time of the shooting. . . . for possible riot control.” Research notes in *JFK: The Book of the Film: The Documented Screenplay* (New York: Applause Books, 1992) confirm that this film passage is supposedly based on the movement of troops as part of Operation “Big Lift.”

Methodology. The U.S. Army’s Center of Military History in Washington, DC, keeps historical card files listing which Army units participated in all combat operations or major training exercises. Other CMH files (“unit files”) contain records for individual Army units documenting their lineage, organization, stations, and participation in combat operations or major training exercises. In both card files, the individual historical entries cite official messages or directives. From these two card files, ARRB researchers were able to assemble both a comprehensive list of the units that participated in Operation “Big Lift” and a list of the relevant cables that recorded deployments and redeployments throughout the exercise. ARRB researchers next extracted those messages (plus any additional Big Lift messages they found) from the 1963 microfilm records of the Pentagon Telecommunications Center. Christopher Hahn, an ARRB summer intern from Indiana University, analyzed these messages in detail and produced the tables and charts attached at Appendix 1. Other appendices are: the chapter describing “Exercise Big Lift” from the *Annual Historical Summary—US Army Europe*,

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1963 prepared by Headquarters, US Army Europe (Appendix 2); miscellaneous Big Lift planning documents (Appendix 3); Big Lift redeployment messages and reports (Appendix 4); the Center of Military History's card entries for Operation Big Lift (Appendix 5); various CMH unit files (Appendix 6); and various contemporaneous news articles (Appendix 7).

Summary of Information Found.

Operation "Big Lift" was a largescale military exercise conducted in October-November, 1963. The purpose of this exercise—which at that time was unprecedented in scale and scope—was to demonstrate American ability to reinforce NATO forces in Germany by the rapid air movement of combat units from bases in the U.S. The goal set by the Joint Chiefs of Staff was to transport the soldiers of the 2d Armored Division, based at Fort Hood, Texas, plus other supporting elements from the U.S. to Germany in less than 72 hours. On arrival in Germany, these forces were to draw heavy weapons, vehicles and equipment from depot stockpiles there and then participate in field maneuvers involving other U.S. and West German military forces. Before Big Lift got underway, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara broadened the exercise to include the simulated deployment of a second combat division, the 4th Infantry Division based at Fort Lewis, Washington. (No combat units from the 4th Infantry Division deployed; only its key leaders and staff personnel went to Germany to conduct a "command post exercise" during the Big Lift field maneuvers.) Since an important goal of Big Lift was a public demonstration of American capability that would reassure European allies, the exercise was carried out openly with substantial press coverage.

The Big Lift main body—14,893 troops and 115 tons of cargo—deployed to Germany on October 22, 23 and 24 in 217 sorties by military aircraft. Though some Big Lift forces made 10-hour, nonstop flights aboard C-135 "Stratolifter" jets, others traveled on propeller-driven C-124 "Globemasters" which cruised at only 270 miles per hour and had to make refueling stops in Bermuda and the Azores. (The troops deployed on Globemasters sometimes spent as long as 32 hours in transit before reaching their destination airfields in Germany.) U.S. officials announced the arrival of the final Big Lift forces on October 24, just over 63 hours after the departure of the first main body elements and nine hours under the 72-hour goal set by the Joint Chiefs.

As the principal purpose of Big Lift had been the rapid deployment of troops to Germany, the redeployment back to the United States was carried out at a much more leisurely pace. A total of 14,150 troops returned aboard 225 aircraft sorties between November 12-22, with the biggest daily increments (roughly 1000-1500 troops per day) occurring between November 13-21. A movement summary report on November 21 stated that 90% of the exercise forces had completed redeployment as of that date.

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It appears from the movement records that Operation Big Lift had no connection to the assassination of President Kennedy. According to the “closure reports” announcing the arrival of individual aircraft sorties, only 222 soldiers (chiefly members of the Second Armored Division’s 502d Aviation Battalion) actually returned to the U.S. aboard four separate flights on November 22, 1963. The first of those four flights (Mission Number 754) had already landed at its destination at 1:32 AM, while two others (Missions 654 and 655) landed at Gray Army Airfield near Fort Hood at 12:35 PM and 1:05 PM local (Texas) time respectively. Applying the Stone “riot control” hypothesis, this means that only a single planeload of troops—Mission 753 with one officer and 59 enlisted men—was actually “in the air above the United States” in the hours immediately following the assassination. (The next planeload of Big Lift troops, Mission 653 carrying 57 soldiers from the 502d Aviation Battalion, was nearly twelve hours behind Mission 753.)

Thus, the assertion made in Stone’s film that “we had a third of a combat division returning from Germany in the air above the United States at the time of the shooting” appears not to be factual. The “third of a combat division” figure appears to have been based on the Big Lift deployment schedule, which moved forces to Germany in roughly equal increments over a period of three days. That, however, was *going to* Germany in October; the *return* to the U.S. in November was significantly slower, and the records indicate that only four aircraft carrying less than two percent of the 2d Armored Division were even in transit on November 22, 1963.

Recommendations for Further Research. In view of the apparent conclusory nature of this evidence, recommend no further ARRB research on this topic.

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