



MISSION TO MAFRAQ

Sidebar to the Six-Day War

Brig Gen (Ret) Tom Pilsch
Bob Cook



On June 5, 1967, the Middle East erupted. After years of increasing hostility from its emboldened Arab neighbors, led by Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and indications that these neighbors were mobilizing, Israel launched a preemptive strike devastating first Egypt's air force, then those of Nasser's allies as a preamble to a blitzkrieg across all of Sinai. The results of this violently executed war plan, now known as the Six-Day War, defined regional geopolitics for decades and radically changed the character of modern mechanized warfare.

When we awoke that morning, neither of us had any idea that we and eight other American Airmen would be heading into that maelstrom.

June 5th began for us in the Congo Palace, a beach-front hotel in a suburb of Athens, Greece—not bad digs for Air Force first lieutenants. It was the contract quarters for crews transiting Hellenikon Air Base, the USAF facility on a corner of nearby Athens International Airport. Our C-130 crews were part of a 36th Tactical Airlift Squadron 90-day temporary duty rotation to RAF Mildenhall in England's East Anglia from our home station at Langley AFB in Virginia. We had been sent to Athens on June 4th for what we thought would be a routine personnel and cargo movement the next day.

Tom's Story

My crew had been in Europe since late March, and it had been a great experience in my first operational assignment. My aircraft commander (AC), Major Keith Hansen, had a lot of experience in multi-engine aircraft and was patient in sharing that knowledge. The flying was fabulous. In addition to going all over England, we had been to numerous NATO bases in Germany (including a corridor flight on the route of the Berlin Airlift into Tempelhof Airport in that then still divided city), Spain, Italy, Turkey, and Norway in addition to the U.S. Air Force gunnery range at Wheelus AB near Tripoli, Libya. This was my first visit to Greece.

Early on June 5th, I learned that I might get to add Jordan to my log book as one of the stops on this aerial odyssey. We were to be the second of two C-130s in a series flying to King Hussein Air Base (also known as Mafraq Air Base) in northern Jordan.

Bob's crew was headed by Captain Carl Millien and would precede us. Unknown at the time was the fact that our mission would be to withdraw people and equipment of the military assistance advisory group (MAAG) Jordan based at Mafraq in the face of rising tensions in the Middle East.



The author and his crewmates, left to right: 1Lt Thomas D. Pilsch-copilot; A2c Russ H. Whalen-loadmaster; SSgt John E Edwards-flight engineer; Capt George W. Whelton Jr.-navigator; Maj Keith L. Hansen-aircraft commander

Despite attempts by the Johnson Administration to limit arms sales to the Middle East, pressure to resist Soviet influence in the area convinced the president of the need to provide additional arms to Jordan in late 1966. The centerpiece of this transaction was the sale of F-104 Starfighter jets to the Royal Jordanian Air Force to replace outdated equipment. A small contingent of these aircraft had been delivered to Mafraq in early 1967 but were far from combat ready. As tension rose in May 1967, these aircraft had been withdrawn to Turkey. Our job would be to remove the U.S. personnel and some high-value equipment.

In our later discussions of preflight activities that morning, neither Bob nor I recalled receiving any intelligence briefing. Our main source



of information during our time in Europe had been from the daily European edition of the *Stars & Stripes* newspapers that found their way across the continent, usually a few days late. There always seemed to be reports of border clashes and threats by the burgeoning United Arab Republic nations to annihilate Israel, but nothing struck us as a warning of imminent conflict. To Bob and I and others of our generation in military service, our focus was more on events half a world away in Asia. Unknown to either of us at the time, less than a year later we both would be flying as forward air controllers (FACs) at opposite ends of Vietnam.

As was my habit during preflight planning for these flights in Europe, I prepared an ONC (operational navigation chart, 1:1M scale) map for the route of flight. We had a good navigator as part of the crew, but I did this to get a better appreciation of the geography and to help us find our way, on the odd chance some or all of the electronic gear should go out while traversing sensitive airspace. This flight would be one of those.

Our route would take us from Athens via airways to Cyprus and entering Syria at Baniyas. From there we would pick up a pre-approved route to avoid Lebanon: southeast past Homs, southwest to Damascus, then south into northern Jordan to Mafraq, about 35 miles north of Amman. As events were to transpire, I would not get to use this map.



Planned route to Mafraq AB on June 5, 1967.

We took off into a clear morning and headed east from Athens. About 45 minutes into the flight approaching Cyprus, we got a call from their air traffic control center:

“Air Force 21786, Cyprus Control. Syrian Radar will not accept your flight plan. What are your intentions?”

Dead silence in the cockpit as Major Hansen and I looked at each other in disbelief.

After a few seconds, Major Hansen told me to request holding at our present position. This was granted, and while he set up a standard holding pattern on the airway, I got on the high frequency radio to contact the European airlift control center at Rhein Main AB in Germany. The frazzled controller informed us that fighting had broken out in the Middle East, and we should return to Athens. Receiving a new flight clearance from Cyprus Control, we turned west.

It was quiet in the cockpit on the way back. We all were thinking about what might be happening to Carl Millien, Bob Cook, and their crew who should have been on the ground at Mafraq by then. Years later, Bob Cook filled in details of what must have been a very exciting day in his life.

Bob's Story

Carl Millien was the junior aircraft commander so we were first in line of about ten C-130 missions headed to King Hussein Air Base to pick up a USAF assistance team and about six communications trailers. We were scheduled to hit the Syrian coast at dawn so we left Athens well before sunrise.

The trip to Mafraq was uneventful. When we shut down on the ramp, we were approached by a USAF colonel who told us there had been a change of plans, and we were only going to take out the people and their personal gear and would leave behind the com trailers. We were the only plane to make it through as Syria had closed its borders.

About the time the communications team started loading, we heard some muffled explosions and the com trailers rocked a bit. We learned they had self-destruct charges and had indeed destructed!

The rest of the team loaded, and we cranked up and headed for the runway. En route, we were cut off by a Jordanian officer in a jeep who signaled he wanted to come on board. He brought a release form on a clip board to sign, the gist of which was that we should fly as low as we could and as fast as we could and the Jordanian Air Force would not shoot us down. We took him at his word and did just that.

The nav gave us a heading for the closest Saudi border, and Carl pushed the throttles to the limit. One of the strangest things I remember about that flight was all the locals waving at us as we went over. I guess a C-130 at 200 feet and 300+ knots is an attention getter.



Escape to Dhahran, June 5th and to Incirlik AB,
Turkey on June 6, 1967.

About 100 miles into Saudi Arabia we popped up to a normal cruising altitude and started making position reports. The bluff worked until we started a descent to 7,000 feet into Dhahran. The Saudi controller called and very apologetically said they were sorry that “we must have lost your diplomatic clearance number and could you please give it to us.” There was a short silence while I took a breath and then told them we didn’t have a diplomatic clearance number.

We were instructed to hold at 7,000 feet. After about 30 minutes we were cleared to land but warned to hold on the taxiway and let no one exit the aircraft. The Saudis surrounded the aircraft with about 100 troops, all wearing red sashes and looking very ceremonial. With the engines shut down, the temperature in the plane reached over 100 degrees, but they eventually let us off, led us into a beautiful terminal, cleared us through immigration, and took us by bus to the former USAF BOQ. They told us the aircraft now belonged to His Majesty King Faisal.

Despite all the drama, most of us got a good night’s sleep. We were awakened about 5:00 a.m. and told we could have our aircraft back but had two hours to be airborne. Apparently the U.S. embassy staff members who were present at our arrival were able to work their diplomatic magic and get us released.

We had a quick breakfast, flight-planned for Incirlik AB, Turkey, and raced out to the aircraft only to find that our crew chief was doing what all airmen of all nations are inclined to do when politics are put aside and the discussion gets down to airplanes and aviation: they help one another. Our missing crew chief was assisting his “hosts” repairing an out-of-commission RSAF Hercules.

Our departure deadline was postponed until the good Samaritan finished assisting his temporary captors. Crew, passengers and airplane then returned uneventfully to

U.S. control as the Six-Day War raged on behind us. To my knowledge, no one debriefed anyone on the crew after our return to U.S. control.

Reflections

The passage of 50 years has provided the opportunity to learn more about the events transpiring elsewhere while the drama at Mafraq was unfolding. Sadly, many of the participants mentioned have passed away or have faded into our society and could not be tracked. Still, research into the records and literature of the Six-Day War has shown what a near-thing this incident was.

A search of the history of the RJAF revealed that the Israeli Air Force attacked Mafraq at 1:00 p.m. local time, and in that strike 20 RJAF fighters and one UN aircraft were destroyed. This was about the time Tom and his crew would have landed had they not been turned back by the Syrians, and it was likely Bob’s aircraft and crew also would have been there had they not been warned by the RJAF. There are many “what ifs” in this scenario, but it is chilling to consider.

It has been said that if you have a choice between being good or lucky, pick lucky. In their flight across Saudi Arabia, everyone on Bob’s airplane was very lucky. The Saudis did not have an active missile defense system in their western desert, and the Royal Saudi Air Force interceptor capability was non-existent. Their unannounced entry into the kingdom in the middle of a regional war was without cost.

It is difficult to review the events of the Six-Day War without remembering the 34 Americans who died on the USS *Liberty* in a still controversial attack by Israeli air and sea forces on June 8. In light of the understandable “no-holds barred” approach of Israel in that war, we are grateful that our Mission to Mafraq remains just a sidebar to this tumultuous conflict. 🇺🇸

BG (Ret) Tom Pilsch retired in 1994 after over 29 years on active duty. He is a command pilot with over 4,000 hours of flying time and more than 300 combat missions in the O-2A Skymaster as a forward air controller at Hue, RVN, 1968-1969. In 1994 Gen. Pilsch began a second career in education, first at Auburn University and then Georgia Tech as a professor of the practice of national security at the Sam Nunn School of International Affairs. Retired since 2014, he now lives in Bryan, Texas.

Bob Cook went on to fly the O-1 Bird Dog at Vung Tau, RVN and then returned to fly the C-130 before starting a successful business in the Denver area where he still lives.