





## Recent events spark memories of what had been USAF's jewel in North Africa.

By Walter J. Boyne

# THE YEARS OF WHEELUS

**I**N a solemn ritual last August, a funeral team at Delaware Veterans Memorial Cemetery laid to rest the remains of 54 Americans. Most were infants. All had just been transported a great distance, and all had been interred once before. They died a long time ago—between 1958 and 1969.

The 54 were among 72 Americans whose bodies had just been retrieved from Hammangi Cemetery in Tripoli, Libya's capital. The deceased were relatives of US airmen once stationed at Wheelus Air Base in that North African country. A planned cemetery repair threatened to disturb the 72 graves, and Libya allowed the US to repatriate the bodies.

US Air Force members stationed in Libya? Many who read accounts of the event no doubt were hearing the name "Wheelus Air Base" for the first time. For USAF members of the 1950s and 1960s, though, the news brought a flood of recollection about a world that vanished decades ago.

Wheelus looms large in the memories of Air Force veterans and their families. Though the sun burned many a back during the summer, the Mediterranean beach brought a welcome relief after a long flight. For the most part, Libya's "364 days of sunshine" weather was

wonderful compared to Europe, but the searing heat and the choking ghiblis—dust storms—caused both flying and maintenance problems. During one of the frequent dust storms, temperatures could soar above 110 degrees.

Nonetheless, Wheelus' location and climate made it for about two decades indispensable to Air Force operations. Politics forced its closing on June 11, 1970. The closure itself was guided by one Col. Daniel "Chappie" James Jr., who distinguished himself under difficult circumstances.

Situated seven miles east of Tripoli, Wheelus provided a convenient refueling point for transports and a forward operating location for Strategic Air Command bombers and tankers. Eighty miles away was the 23,000-acre El Uotia gunnery range, frequently used by fighter-bomber units based in Europe and elsewhere. A natural logistic springboard to the entire Middle East, Wheelus was also a convenient spot for many clandestine intelligence operations over the years.

Events leading to the creation of Wheelus were historically important to aviation. In 1911, imperial Italian forces invaded the crumbling Ottoman Empire's North African provinces and, in 1912, consolidated two—Tripolitania and Cyre-

naica—into a single state called Libya. In 1923, the Italian conquerors opened Mehalla Air Base near Tripoli.

Over the years, the base grew in size and importance. When World War II broke out, German forces moved in and joined Italian air forces for operations in North Africa. The base was used by the Luftwaffe until January 1943, when it was captured by the famed "Desert Rats" of the British Eighth Army, led by Gen. Bernard L. Montgomery and his air chief, RAF Air Chief Marshal Arthur W. Tedder.

### A New Government

The United States Army Air Forces immediately began air operations from Mehalla. It was the start of a long and useful relationship. The end of the war came, but the Allies didn't leave. On May 17, 1945, the American military renamed the facility Wheelus Air Base in honor of 1st Lt. Richard Wheelus, an airman who was killed in Iran earlier that year.

The relationship between the people of Libya, on one hand, and the Allies, on the other, soon was clouded by politics. Italy had been a cruel colonial power, and local resentment more or less was transferred toward the US and Britain. American and British officers, concerned about the drift of things, sought to create a government friendly to the West. In the end, the United Nations established the independent state of Libya on Dec. 24, 1951, with King Muhammad Idris Al-Sanusi I as head of state. Idris had sided with Britain against the Germans during World War II, but was not a popular figure.

In the 1950s, Wheelus became a powerful economic engine within Libya, which was then dirt poor. The money, as was true in most Third World nations, tended to flow to a few rich families rather than more broadly to the people. The inequality of wealth was magnified

in 1959 by the discovery of oil, which overnight transformed Libya from one of Africa's poorest nations into one of its richest. Once again, customary practices diverted most of the oil revenue to a small upper class.

Over the years, Wheelus became invaluable to the United States. Its control was taken up by the Military Air Transport Service and it became a well-known and important stop for big transports, but the heat was a constant problem. Retired Lt. Col. Harry Heist, a veteran of the era, recalls that when runway temperatures were high, his C-124 would break ground, then have to fly at rooftop level for several miles before being able to start the climb to altitude.

In 1951, Libya made available to USAF fighter and bomber units the excellent facilities at the El Uotia range. It was through the years used for training in air-to-air combat, air-to-ground gunnery, and conventional and nuclear ordnance delivery. In 1958, elements of the 20th Fighter-Bomber Wing took over the management of what was by then called the USAF weapons training center. Poor weather in Europe frequently would shut down USAF squadrons for days at a time, but they could get a month of uninterrupted training at Wheelus.

Some units found permanent homes there. The 58th Aerospace Rescue and

Artwork by Henry Koehler



**Artist Henry Koehler's drawing commemorates the events of Armed Forces Day in 1956 at Wheelus.**

location for Strategic Air Command, especially in the early days of aerial refueling, when aerial tankers were few. SAC deployed to Wheelus B-50 and B-47 heavy bombers as well as KB-29, KB-50, KC-97, and KC-135 tankers. They, along with a variety of support aircraft, were maintained by permanent housekeeping units. The rotating crews and airplanes normally stayed for 45-day periods.

In 1951, USAF was given responsibility for Wheelus, with the 7272nd Air Base Wing (later Fighter Trainer Wing) given duties as the host unit. Also operating out of the base were many other units, including the 431st Fighter Interceptor Squadron—the “Red Dev-

Egypt, Syria, and Jordan and seize Sinai, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Given Israel's close ties to Washington, it was no surprise that the war sent a shockwave of anti-American resentment through Libya, where the US Embassy was stoned and two vehicles from Wheelus burned and their drivers beaten. The US Embassy decided to evacuate all Americans willing to leave Libya. The sudden influx of contractors and civilians drove Wheelus' population temporarily to 9,000, of whom more than 6,300 were evacuated.

### Enter Qaddafi

Soon afterward, the increasingly hostile Libyan parliament began issuing calls for removal of foreign military bases from Libyan soil. In a response, Washington launched a series of public relations programs. It expanded US support for the Royal Libyan Air Force, supervising flying training in the F-5s fighters that Libya had purchased, and so forth. This had little discernible effect.

Through all of this, USAF was preparing for the inevitable. It began to reduce investment in base maintenance and seek alternate facilities in other countries.

The base's fate was determined on Sept. 1, 1969, when a small group of Libyan Army officers seized control of the central government, declared the abolition of the Libyan monarchy, and announced establishment of the Libyan Arab Republic. Idris was in Greece at the time, undergoing a lengthy treatment of an illness. In return for assurance of the safety of his family, Idris quickly capitulated and agreed not to contest the takeover.

Shortly after the bloodless coup, a new strongman, 27-year-old Muammar Qaddafi, rose from captain to colonel and became Libya's maximum leader. In a single day, Libya was changed from a



**Opposite, F-86 Sabres roar off the runway at Wheelus AB, Libya. Left, an aerial view of the base's 11,000-foot runway.**

Recovery Squadron was stationed there from 1952 through 1970. In a notable event, three Sikorsky HH-3E Jolly Greens from Wheelus in 1969 flew into flood-ravaged Tunisia and saved the lives of at least 433 people trapped in high waters.

Wheelus' location and clear weather made it a natural forward operating

ils”—flying F-86F and D models. From 1956 through 1959, Wheelus was the site of the USAF's 17th Air Force.

Nationalism was always an ever-present problem, but it underwent a sharp increase in the late 1960s. The Mideast War of June 1967 saw Israeli forces in a mere six days inflict near-total defeat on



**A USAF cargo airplane is loaded with moveable assets as part of USAF's evacuation of Wheelus.**

monarchy friendly to the United States to a radical Arab state led by a political firebrand who incessantly demanded expulsion of American forces.

Col. Daniel "Chappie" James Jr. had just arrived at Wheelus in August 1969 as commander of the 7272nd Fighter Training Wing, and would play a key role in shutting down the base while sometimes dealing personally with Qaddafi.

There followed months of discussions between the US and Libya, conducted for the most part in a courteous manner but with the desire of some Libyan negotiators to appear to their constituents to be tough.

One major diplomatic contretemps severely damaged the fraying relations. Daniel A. DeCarlo, who was supervising principal of the Wheelus dependent school system, contrived to smuggle a Libyan Jew to Malta, hidden in a crate manifested as containing musical instruments. The aircraft commander was unaware of the stowaway.

The smuggled Libyan was discovered and reported. DeCarlo was arrested and pleaded guilty to violation of Maltese immigration laws. Joseph Palmer II, US ambassador in Tripoli, apologized to the Libyan government, making it clear that no US agency had a part in the incident. Both US and Libyan military security was greatly increased at the terminal as a result.

The situation was deteriorating quickly at this point. On Oct. 16, 1969, Qaddafi called for "the liquidation of foreign bases on Libyan soil." Fourteen days later, Palmer received a formal Libyan note asking for discussions on the evacuation of US forces. Requests for the resumption of USAF training flights at Wheelus were rejected by Qaddafi.

The best the United States could achieve was agreement that the base

rights agreement would be adhered to until "the last airman and last aircraft had departed." While the US sought to delay the turnover until September 1970, Libyan negotiators insisted that the final transfer of the base be concluded by June 30, 1970.

### **Irrational Decisions**

Negotiations continued to worsen as the Libyans sought to acquire vehicles, equipment, and "demountable real property" in exchange for their continued cooperation. In the words of an official USAF history, Libya's "dark suspicions of USAF intentions resulted in unpredictable and often irrational Libyan decisions."

James (who would later rise to four-star rank as commander of North American Aerospace Defense Command) played a vital and effective role in keeping negotiations on track. He supervised the withdrawal of 4,000 personnel and \$21 million in removable assets.

In addition, James and Qaddafi had at least one personal confrontation, a face-off that has now become the stuff of legend in the Air Force. In a face-to-face encounter during the base's final days, James noted that Qaddafi was wearing a sidearm in a holster strapped to his leg. As the two men talked, moreover, the Libyan leader moved his hand onto the grip of the weapon. James later recalled, "I had my .45 in my belt. I told him to move his hand away. If he had pulled that gun, he never would have cleared his holster."

Qaddafi withdrew his hand and the

confrontation ended without violence. Within months, both James and the American air base were gone from Libya for good.

The loss of Wheelus did not prove to be a military catastrophe. By 1970, SAC deployed a large tanker force and had increased its reliance on US-based ICBMs. All of the Wheelus functions were transferred to other bases.

Still, it was a sad day for many when Wheelus closed. On that day—June 11, 1970—the base was closed with a low-key, five minute ceremony that featured a Libyan military band playing the "Star Spangled Banner" at the lowering of the US flag and the Libyan national anthem at the raising of Libya's standard. No speeches were given.

The last USAF aircraft to leave Wheelus was a C-130, airborne at 8:41 a.m., which carried the last commander, Col. Walter J. Russell Jr., to Germany.

The site would remain prominent in USAF thinking, however. After renaming it Uqba Bin Nafi Air Base, Tripoli invited Soviet forces to move in, which they did. Moscow stationed equipment and troops at the base. Much of their activity was in support of the sale of Soviet MiG fighters and Tupolev Tu-22 Blinder bombers to Qaddafi's fledgling air force.

Qaddafi was implicated in several high-profile terrorist acts in the mid-1980s, culminating in the April 5, 1986 bombing of a Berlin nightclub packed with US troops. This prompted President Ronald Reagan nine days later to launch Operation El Dorado Canyon, a punitive raid that saw some 100 USAF and Navy aircraft attack numerous targets in Libya—including Uqba Bin Nafi.

The US attack marked a kind of turning point. By most accounts, it had a sobering effect on Qaddafi, and, though his rhetoric never faltered, he greatly reduced his actual use of violence and force. After nearly 20 years of this cold peace with Washington, Libya opted for better relations and restored diplomatic relations in 2006. A year later, the 72 Americans finally came home.

Libya now calls the old Wheelus base site Mitiga Airport, and it is still active in civil and military aviation in North Africa and the Mediterranean, as it is in the memories of the thousands of USAF men and women who served there. ■

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