
South Africa's Air Force Faces the Future

"What people do is often of far less importance than why they do it"
G.K. Chesterton

By

Major Kent D. Johnson, USAF

[The following agencies reviewed and approved this article for publication: OSD/ISA (Africa Region), AF/XOXX (Africa Branch), State Department South African Desk Officer, OSD/DSAA-OPS/MAA (Sub-Saharan Desk Officer), and the South African Defense Attaché.]

THE EVENT

The South African Air Force, the world's second oldest air force as an independent service, celebrated its 75th Anniversary with an international airshow in Pretoria, South Africa last October. This air show was unique for two main reasons. Within the political context of the dismantling of apartheid and the election of an African National Congress President, the mere fact that the South African Air Force survived this transition and continues to thrive as a disciplined and well-trained service is quite extraordinary. In addition, the United States Air Force, in a notable demonstration of support for South Africa, participated in this celebration with the display of a broad selection of U.S. aircraft and with General Ronald R. Fogleman, U.S. Air Force Chief of Staff, serving as the key-note speaker at a concurrent air power symposium.

USAF PARTICIPATION

The United States Air Force joined in the 75th Anniversary celebration as a demonstration of support on behalf of the United States government for the South African government, and to strengthen ties between our air forces. To this end the United States Air Force sent KC-10, KC-135, C-141, C-130 and F-15E aircraft for static display plus an F-16 to provide aerial demonstrations. U.S. Air Force participation in this air show was narrow in scope, and strictly adhered to U.S. laws governing Air Force engagement in events such as this. United States Air Force participation was most certainly not, as inferred by a *New York Times* report, an effort to generate foreign military sales. However, notwithstanding Air Force efforts to avoid the subject of foreign military sales, many South African political and military leaders expressed a lively interest in acquiring U.S. fighters.

RUSSIAN PARTICIPATION

Unlike the United States Air Force, the Russian Air Force participation was apparently motivated by the opportunity to generate sales of Russian aircraft to South Africa. The Russians provided the MIG-29, SU-31 and SU-35 aircraft for aerial demonstrations, plus an Antonov An-124 "Condor" (the world's largest airlift aircraft) for static display. However, despite past Russian/South African political ties, the unpolished, unprofessional, and overly aggressive marketing efforts of the Russians were not well received by the South Africans, and were ultimately unsuccessful. In reality, aside from an occasional gratuitous or uninformed remark by a South African politician, the South Africans were, in private, disdainful of Russian marketing methods and military hardware. This attitude is not too surprising since

most African National Congress leaders were not originally driven by a passion for communism or socialism, just a desire for military support to win their struggle with apartheid. Therefore, aggressive Russian efforts to initiate overseas military sales were met with some resentment by South African Air Force personnel, and quiet toleration by the Government of South Africa. Recent Russian military sales to the South African Air Force (e.g., MIG engines) are viewed by the South African government and Air Force as merely political payback and not a precursor to serious South African attempts to acquire a fleet of Russian military equipment.

After speaking with several Russian “salesmen,” it became evident that strengthening political-military ties with the South African government was of no particular concern. Their apparent lack of interest may be due to a belief that South Africa “owes” the Russians for past political, economic and military support of the African National Congress. However, what is more than likely driving this lack of political-military focus is harsh Russian economic reality.

The Russian economy is in serious trouble, and the only major industry in Russia that is still producing anything remotely marketable is its arms manufacturing industry. Consequently, significant domestic economic pressure is being brought to bear on its military hardware industry to generate cash-flow through overseas military sales. And the Russian arms manufacturing industry has responded with newfound capitalistic zeal. It has adopted a sort of “Guns R Us” marketing strategy that makes quick sales the primary goal, with crucial follow-on hardware support and political-military implications placing second and third in importance. In essence, stark internal economic pressures in Russia have relegated classic political-military considerations to the rear cockpit. For instance, a Russian salesman seriously attempted to “sell” a visiting U.S. Air Force officer the new MIG Advanced Trainer as a replacement for the aging United States Air Force T-37 primary jet trainer.

Crude Russian marketing methods stand in contrast to the approach the United States employs in its sales efforts. Ever mindful of the importance of military aid, all decisions regarding the transfer of U.S. military aid are primarily driven by political-military considerations. In essence, if it is not in the best interest of the United States (as determined by the White House, Congress, Department of State, Department of Defense, the individual Services, and Department of Commerce, to name a few), then the transfer does not take place. Once it has been decided that aid, in the form of foreign military sales, is in the best interest of the United States then complicated arrangements for the sale take place.

The “standard” United States military hardware sale involves a “total package approach” (TPA). TPA demands, with very few exceptions, a comprehensive follow-on training and support package. It is in no one’s interest to sell military hardware to an ally that is not trained to use it or that cannot maintain and support it. Without proper training and follow-on support, sophisticated U.S. military aid becomes nothing more than rusting hulks—iron-on-the-ramp that serve no political-military purpose. Currently, unconstrained by the requisities of a TPA, the Russian basic approach to foreign military sales can be best described as a “buy-now, pay-later” pitch, with payment in the form of lost military capability.

To be sure, political-military interests are still important to the Russian government, but on a much smaller scale and focused closer to home. For the Russians, sub-Saharan Africa does not warrant attention solely for political or military purposes—it is way too costly and the return on any political or economic investment in African nations is just not there.

With the end of the Cold War, the dismantling of the former Soviet Union, and the subsequent economic collapse of Russia, the need for an active sub-Saharan political-military effort is virtually non-existent and is most certainly economically unsupportable.

Consequently, a vacuum now exists within that tormented region of the world. After many years of attracting attention during the Cold War years, the sub-Saharan nations which were previously supported by the Soviets have been virtually forgotten. And today many of these countries are bankrupt themselves after decades of abysmally poor leadership, stifling economic policies, and brutal political oppression. With the Soviets no longer providing the bulwark of economic and political support necessary to survive, these former adversaries are now in the awkward position of trying to solicit economic, political, and military support from the United States. Indeed, several representatives from former Soviet protectorates in Africa have approached the United States recently in what appears to be an effort to warm relations (and to obtain needed assistance).

THE SIR PIERRE VAN RYNEVELD AIR POWER SYMPOSIUM

In addition to an impressive international air show, the South African Air Force hosted its annual Sir Pierre van Ryneveld Air Power Symposium. This year's theme centered around the need for "an offensive air capability in the South African Air Force." The symposium was well attended, with air chiefs from more than 30 nations participating. The most notable and highly visible guest speaker was the United States Air Force Chief of Staff, General Ronald R. Fogleman.

General Fogleman served as the principle guest speaker and, not belying his training as a historian and past Air Force Academy instructor, framed his remarks within a historical context. In his speech, he underscored the important role the South African Air Force played in aviation history and emphasized the shared history of the United States Air Force and the South African Air Force. General Fogleman concluded his remarks with a statement concerning the "mutually supportive" nature of democracies and air power, and the need to build upon this relationship.

In the past there have been examples of governments surviving or toppling merely by the support or non-support of an air force. In the South African case, with the technical capabilities of its Air Force, it may be argued that whoever controls the air force controls the government. Therefore, former South African President (now co-vice president) Willem de Klerk deserves respect for choosing not to engage in an all-out domestic civil war by turning the military (air force included) into a barbarous tool of destruction in the turbulent years leading up to President Mandela's election in 1994.

In addition to General Fogleman there were other South African speakers, plus speakers from other African countries. Two of the most notable African speakers were Mr. Joseph Modise, the South African Minister of Defense, and General James Kriel, the Chief of Staff of the South African Air Force. Most interesting was what these speakers had to say regarding the future role of South Africa in Southern African affairs, and the requirement for a modern South African Air Force with an "offensive" capable fighter.

In his talk, Mr. Modise addressed South Africa's need to modernize the South African Air Force while at the same time stressing that the new South Africa has no intention to be a regional threat. To that end, he made it clear that any modernization effort, specifically the acquisition of a new fighter aircraft, will have to wait until sometime in the future, after more pressing domestic problems are addressed. His remarks about slowing the pace of military modernization were not wholly unexpected. Within the context of huge economic demands on the South African government to improve social services, provide job training, educate the masses, and do what governments are supposed to do, it follows that the South African Air Force, with no real air threat nearby, will have to wait to modernize and acquire a modern "offensive" fighter.

Though Mr. Modise seemed to embrace the need for a new fighter, he tempered his remarks with words of peace, regional cooperation, and friendship. He spoke sincerely about South Africa's desire to be a regional partner for peace, with no intention to assume an aggressive posture—clearly downplaying the acquisition of a modern “offensive” fighter. Apparently mindful of South Africa's relative wealth, power, and past unilateral military actions, Mr. Modise wished to make it understood that South Africa is committed to a more neighborly approach to regional matters, and the acquisition of a modern “defensive” fighter will have to wait. Essentially, “butter” won over “guns” at this time.

As a professional warrior in the service of his country, General Kriel is a highly polished officer, accomplished pilot, and erudite speaker. His address was less political in nature, and he spoke more directly to the need for a modern and capable South African Air Force. This force, he said, would be defensive in nature but with the ability, when necessary, to take the fight to the enemy—a true winning strategy. Though the General's speech was a bit more technical in nature, he echoed Mr. Modise's main points: one, South Africa has no plan to become a military threat to the sub-Saharan region; and two, the South African Air Force has identified a need to modernize its fighter fleet in the near future. Though General Kriel appeared to disagree with Mr. Modise about the timing of the modernization effort, they both seemed to agree that an “offensive” fighter is necessary to support the “best-defense-is-a-good-offense” approach.

Throughout the symposium, the coordinated presentations and subtle verbal thrusts of Mr. Modise and General Kriel, combined with the less-than-enthusiastic South African reception to Russian sales efforts, seemed to suggest the South Africans might view the United States as a source for future modernization of their fighter aircraft—either by technical upgrades (not likely), or through a new aircraft buy (likely). Logically then, the F-16—with its much shorter range and significantly lighter payload than the deep-strike F-15E—would be the South African “defensive” fighter of choice of the two aircraft to support this new defensive/offensive mission.

The new South African good-neighbor policy of increased cooperation was probably not lost on Major General Masire, Chief of the Botswana Air Arm. As South Africa's immediate neighbor to the north, Botswana, with its strong economic base, stable government and increasingly active peacekeeping role, could be South Africa's main rival for a dominant sub-Saharan leadership role. However, Botswana is a more mature government and does not wish to challenge South Africa's position—militarily or otherwise. It is not that Botswana fears a confrontation, *per se*; rather, Botswana long ago recognized its physical and political limitations and decided to work within them. (As an aside, Botswana territory was frequently overflowed by South African Air Force aircraft during the civil war in Angola, and Botswana could have benefited from an offensive fighter capability that would have at least allowed it the face-saving gesture of “challenging” unauthorized South African overflights.)

Zimbabwe, on the other hand, according to conversations with the Zimbabwe Chief of Staff, Air Vice Marshall Ian Harvey, is very keen on the idea of increasing its role as a regional peacekeeper. This attitude is supported by past statements and actions on the part of Zimbabwe's President, Robert Mugabe. Although Zimbabwe has a relatively large military, it has neither the political stability nor economic strength necessary to emerge as a major player in sub-Saharan events. Thus, because of severe economic and political limitations, Zimbabwe will likely not be in a position to act upon its desire to assume a dominant role in sub-Saharan Africa.

The remaining neighbors which share a border with South Africa—Namibia and Mozambique—are both facing serious internal political and socio-economic challenges, and are in no position to assume any leadership role. Therefore, at this time, these countries will remain excluded from any discussions regarding regional leadership issues.

This leaves sub-Saharan Africa in a curious situation: Zimbabwe wants a dominant sub-Saharan leadership role, but lacks political stability and economic capability; and Botswana possesses the political stability and economic strength to assume such a role, but recognizing its own limitations, does not seek the role. This leaves South Africa. Notwithstanding comments to the contrary by South African leaders, South Africa, at least by default, has been assigned the role of sub-Saharan leader.

“THE BIG QUESTION”

If we accept South Africa’s need for a modern offensive fighter, which still needs to be determined, the question arises: Should the United States support South Africa by engaging in foreign military aid to provide such a fighter? The answer lies in an evaluation of the current South African political situation and an assessment of the prospects for a stable and democratic future.

CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION

The political situation in South Africa is now precariously balanced between the need for long-term evolutionary change to ensure the very survival of South Africa as a multiethnic, fully participatory democratic republic, and the demands for short-term, revolutionary political and economic changes to satisfy the impatient desires of the formerly oppressed majority.

In order to sustain South African economic development and to maintain the relatively high standard of living of the important middle-class, prudence dictates a cautious approach to initiating social, economic, and political change. Otherwise, massive internal stresses placed upon the predominantly white middle-class will accumulate and eventually cause a fatal infrastructure stress fracture in the form of “white flight.” One senses President Mandela understands this and is willing to slow the pace of reform to avoid alarming the white population. If he fails in this mission, “white flight” is sure to follow, with economic and social development grinding to a halt. Zimbabwe is a recent example of just how devastating “white flight” can be to a country’s sustenance and development. Therefore, a slow pace of reform is essential to reassure the South African White minority population that its very survival, economically and otherwise, will not be threatened by an overly aggressive redistribution effort and “affirmative action” programs.

However, as post-election euphoria wanes, and the brutal realities of daily life take hold, the enormous black underclass is becoming increasingly impatient with what they perceive as a snail’s pace of reform. Hence, conflict and civil strife have been on the rise and will continue to exert pressure on the Government of South Africa to speed-up the tempo of reform and to “do something.” Fortunately, President Mandela is a powerful leader who has earned the respect and allegiance of all major political factions in South Africa and has been successful, thus far, in moderating demands for radical change.

President Mandela, leading a transitional South African government, faces the unenviable challenge of trying to untie a Gordian knot. This knot, composed of reactionary and revolutionary political, economic, and social fibers, presents a very difficult task indeed. Fortunately, unlike Alexander the Great who defeated the knot by destroying it, President

Mandela possesses the moral stature, savvy, and political will necessary to unravel these twisted fibers, thereby preserving South Africa, not destroying it. At least not until the next election.

FUTURE PROSPECTS

If South Africa is to survive, three main events must occur to ensure a bright future: one, President Mandela must survive until the next presidential election in 1999 (twenty-five years in prison has taken quite a toll on Mandela's health); two, Mandela must nominate and prepare an heir apparent to take his place before the next election; and three, the new South African constitution must be approved and supported by the vast majority of South African political parties. If any of these three elements are missing, the likelihood of a peaceful and prosperous South African future will be greatly reduced.

CONCLUSION

Currently, the United States provides only non-lethal military aid to South Africa. While the United States would reap immediate political, military, and economic benefits by providing lethal military aid to South Africa, we must refrain from exercising that option prematurely. If the United States acts too soon to provide lethal aid, the potential misuse of this aid for domestic purposes cannot be ruled out. If South Africa's bold moves toward political reform fail and domestic political struggles turn deadly, enormous negative political, military, and economic fallout would result from reports of lethal United States military equipment being used in the murderous oppression of the South African people. Therefore, at this time, the United States should continue to strengthen government-to-government and military-to-military relations with South Africa, and provide only *non-lethal* military support. Essentially, the United States should delay providing lethal military aid until South Africa completes its transition toward a stable democratic republic. Once this transition has taken place, and the South Africans have demonstrated follow-on political stability, only then should the United States seriously consider the provision of lethal military aid, and only if asked.

Ultimately, by increasing political and military ties with South Africa, the United States will contribute to the stabilization of the South African government (an important ally in the region), enhance South African credibility with its neighbors, and significantly improve United States access and influence within the region. Once the United States is firmly established as a partner for peace with a stable South African government, any potential political, economic, or military competitor within the region will have a very difficult task trying to displace the United States' position in sub-Saharan affairs.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major Kent D. Johnson, USAF, is the South African Country Director on the staff of the Secretary of the Air Force, International Affairs. He is a former T-37 instructor pilot and A-10/F-15E fighter pilot. His prior assignments have included service aboard the USS LaSalle during Operation Earnest Will, combat operations as Air Liaison Officer with the 101st Airborne Division during Desert Shield/Storm, and F-15E combat missions in support of Southern Watch. Major Johnson holds B.S. and M.Ed. degrees from Southwest Texas State University, and a MAS degree from Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (European Campus).