

Anyone stationed at or visiting Travis cannot help but encounter the Golden Bear, a gleaming C-141B StarLifter on display at the end of Travis Avenue.

The meticulously restored plane was put in its current location in September 2005, 40 years after arriving at the base amid much fanfare April 23, 1965. Now that we have reached the Golden Bear's 50th anniversary, it is a perfect time to reflect on that jet and the enduring legacy of an airframe former MAC commander Gen. Jack Catton said marked a "new era in airlift, a new era in mobility."

Before the C-141 entered regular service in 1965, the Air Force flew a variety of legacy and transitional cargo airframes commonly seen at Travis during the 1950s and 1960s. Largest of these aircraft was the massive turbo-prop C-133 Cargomaster, a plane so enormous that it could carry Atlas and other ballistic missiles. It flew out of Travis from 1958 through 1970 until replaced by the C-5 and probably not a moment too soon as 20 percent of the entire C-133 fleet was lost to fatal crashes.

Another legacy cargo plane that predated the C-141 was the C-124 Globemaster II, a vintage propeller aircraft powered by four massive piston-driven reciprocating engines. C-124s could carry large, heavy loads, but they were slow and could not fly at high altitudes to avoid adverse weather.

In hindsight, it must have been tortuous for crews and passengers alike as it lumbered slowly over the Pacific between Travis, Hawaii and East Asia. In fact, it was three times as slow as the C-141 and a round trip from Travis to Vietnam reportedly took more than 90 hours. On top of that, C-124s were known as "Old Shakey," an affectionate nickname given by crews that accurately captured the shuddering sensation felt inside the plane during flight.

The Air Force also flew C-118 Liftmasters, a small four-engine propeller plane from 1951 used chiefly for hauling passengers, along with the C-135 Stratolifter, a derivative of the KC-135 Stratotanker. The C-118 was a modified commercial DC-6 passenger aircraft. Likewise, the 1950s-era C-135 was a modified Boeing 707 jet that was pressed into duty in 1961 as a stopgap before the C-141s were built.

Though generally adequate, none of the planes mentioned above were the answer to the needs of global airlift during the height of the Cold War and into the Vietnam War, especially for mass Army troop movements: The C-124 was too slow, C-133s were often broken and prone to crashing, the C-118 was too small and the C-135 was just a temporary solution.

The Lockheed C-141A was the answer. As a jet aircraft designed and built from scratch to meet the needs of the military, it fundamentally transformed strategic airlift.

Travis Air Force Base's C-141B 63-8088, better known as the Golden Bear, was just one of hundreds of C-141s operated by the Air Force between 1965 and 2006, but it has a number of claims to fame that make it stand out.

Most significantly, it had the honor of being the first C-141 to land at Travis in front of 3,500 guests and onlookers. On top of that, when it joined the 44th Air Transport Squadron under the 1501st Air Transport Wing, a predecessor of the 60th AMW, it was the first C-141 to be flown operationally.

The Golden Bear also had the distinction of being the first "Lead the Force" C-141, which put it through an accelerated testing and operational program that had the jet flying twice as much as other C-141s entering service at the time. In fact, the Golden Bear was scheduled to fly 3,600 hours during its first year, the equivalent of two years worth of normal flying time.

Finally, the Golden Bear reportedly flew its entire 31-year career out of Travis Air Force Base. Whether that was by design, it is a record that connects the plane to the base and California in a specific way.

The Golden Bear name - chosen by Gen. Howell Estes, commander of Military Air Transport System, a forerunner to AMC - also ties the plane to Travis and California. This was on purpose for the C-141 already was identified as playing a key role in the growing Vietnam conflict and Travis was in the right spot to host that mission.

Meanwhile, Estes flew the Golden Bear from the Lockheed-Marietta plant in Georgia to Travis April 23, 1965, and was at the center of the turnover ceremony along with the president of Lockheed-Georgia, Dick Pulver, plus various other senior Air Force leadership, local dignitaries and media representatives.

In conjunction with the arrival of the Golden Bear and two other C-141s, Travis gave demonstrations of its new cargo handling facility and capabilities for quickly loading C-141s.

Once the festivities ended, the Golden Bear was immediately put to work. In late May, it was the first StarLifter to fly nonstop across the Pacific from Travis to Yokota Air Base, Japan. In December 1966, the Golden Bear was one of many C-141s that airlifted nearly 3,000 troops and 6,000 tons of equipment to Pleiku, Vietnam, as the conflict in Southeast Asia began to ramp up.

The Golden Bear was in and out of Vietnam during the war years and, in 1973, participated in Operation Homecoming, which repatriated POWs to the United States. There were various contingencies and humanitarian missions in the following decades, as well as flights to Antarctica in support of Operation Deep Freeze.

To its credit, the Travis community never seems to have forgotten the Golden Bear's place in history. In 1978, the 60th Military Airlift Wing recognized the Golden Bear for having flown 25,000 hours, and, in 1984, the wing held a flightline ceremony marking the 25th anniversary of its arrival at Travis.

On March 17, 1996, the crew of the Golden Bear flew the plane for 5.2 hours on what turned out to be its final flight. During its storied career and under various paint schemes, C-141 63-8088 logged a total of 41,470 hours and made 21,982 landings at airfields around the world, in war and peace, during contingencies and normal operations. It, like the rest of the C-141 fleet, was a workhorse, the legacy to which the C-5 Galaxy and C-17 Globemaster are heirs.

After its last flight, the Golden Bear languished on the Travis flightline for years, though wisely it was earmarked for preservation. On Sept. 16, 2005, the plane, fully restored, was given another day in the sun as base leadership and local dignitaries joined to remember the Golden Bear.

Commensurate with its special place in airlift history, volunteers from the Travis Heritage Center have continued to keep the plane looking as though it just came out of the Lockheed factory. For those stationed at Travis who have yet to walk around the plane, now is a good time to do so as the Golden Bear symbolizes the Air Force's transition to modern strategic airlift 50 years ago this month.