



# Ervas End, Ervas Begin

**It's goodbye Rhein-Main, hello new and improved Ramstein and Spangdahlem**

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts photos by Master Sgt. Keith Reed

**An F-16 Fighting Falcon makes a smooth landing** beside an eruption of construction paving the way for heavy aircraft to land at Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany, as part of the Rhein-Main Transition Program. Rhein-Main Air Base, Germany, long known as the "Gateway to Europe" and home to historic events such as the Berlin Airlift, will close its doors for good and transition its mission to Ramstein Air Base, Germany, and Spangdahlem by December 2005.

# ERAS new and improved Ramstein and Spangdahlem

After almost five years and \$540 million, the Rhein-Main Transition Program will finish by its Dec. 31, 2005, deadline.

"Five years from decision to completion. The magnitude of the effort is incredible," said John Thompson, the U.S. Air Forces in Europe manager for the ambitious American-German effort.

In a nutshell, the program calls for closing down Rhein-Main Air Base, transitioning its cargo and passenger service mission to Ramstein Air Base, and beefing up Spangdahlem Air Base as the overflow base for Ramstein.

For almost five decades, multitudes of young service members and their families, as well as pets, have touched down at Rhein-Main — also known as the "Gateway to Europe" — where they began their first overseas tours.

In 1994, the base's C-130 Hercules mission moved to Ramstein where it filled the vacancy of the F-16 Fighting Falcon mission that moved to Aviano Air Base, Italy. The primary mission of Rhein-Main now is to provide airlift support for contingency operations, and to receive the continual arrival of troops heading for duty in Europe via commercial contract aircraft.

But circumstances evolved that allowed a "unique window of opportunity" for "drawing down smartly," Mr. Thompson explained. The Frankfurt International Airport has long sought to expand its operations area, and Rhein-Main is collocated with the civilian airport.

## Beginning of the end

In December 1993, base officials announced plans to draw down to half the size and reduce the active duty force by more than two-thirds. Six years later, U.S. Air Force and German authorities signed an agreement to close and return the base to Germany by December 2005.

In doing so, Mr. Thompson said, the transition will centralize operations at Ramstein and provide NATO with an airlift hub for its northern region.

"It fits right in with the aerospace expeditionary force concept and allows us to move people quickly," he said.

Financially, the transaction will alleviate spending approximately \$17 million annually to keep Rhein-Main operational. Once the transition is complete, the Air Force is expected to pump almost \$30 million annually into the Ramstein and Spang-

dahlem area economies.

Deployed airmen in particular will appreciate the transition. Gone will be the days of landing at Rhein-Main heavily laden with gear, only to realize they must find transportation to Ramstein to further await a C-130 hop downrange.

Not only will new arrivals land at Ramstein, but a centralized ring of accommodations will await them only a short walk away. In conjunction with the transition program, the Kaiserslautern Military Community is shifting its passenger service terminal, billeting, restaurants, theaters and a new base exchange to one central location.

But at the other end of the spectrum is Paul Molnar. As facilities and capabilities emerge and expand at Ramstein and Spangdahlem, he is tasked with closing shop at Rhein-Main. It's both daunting and emotional.

"It's almost like closing down my alma mater," said Mr. Molnar, who has lived in the Rhein-Main community for 34 years as both an active duty airman and a civilian employee.

Mr. Molnar hates to see his job and a way of life go away, but said he both understands and agrees with the change. His focus now is to "slowly and surely" transition from a contingency hub where record-setting numbers of flights, fuel and passengers are being sent to support the war on terrorism, to final closure while at the same time taking care of about 1,900 people assigned and deployed to Rhein-Main. As for himself, he has plans to remain on

the job until he's working from a cardboard box and a lettuce crate.

## Spinning up at Spangdahlem

Meanwhile, Udo Stuermer is leading the charge at Spangdahlem to beef up the runway and expand support facilities to accommodate heavies such as the C-5 Galaxy. The engineering flight commander has a history in big projects. He helped oversee the drawdown of nearby Bitburg Air Base and was in the midst of building up Spangdahlem facilities as part of the Eifel 2010 project when the Rhein-Main Transition Project fell into his lap.

"Sometimes I feel like chaos is managing us, and sometimes I feel like we have control of the chaos," he joked while sitting inside an empty bus after giving a windshield tour update to local German media on construction progress.

Spangdahlem is home to the 52nd Fighter Wing that flies the A-10 Warthog and the F-16. Its new

*Working through the night, construction workers dismantle a piece of Air Force history as they take down the "Gateway to Europe" arch that stood for decades above Rhein-Main's main entrance. The base will be used by adjacent Frankfurt International Airport for cargo operations, and the Rhein-Main mission will be absorbed by two remaining U.S. bases in Germany.*



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mission will be as an overflow host for aircraft moving into or through the European region. But even though its role will only be that of understudy, it must still be prepared for center stage at a moment's notice. Getting there equates to 23 construction projects totaling approximately \$175 million. As with all transition expenditures, the vast majority is paid by the German government and the German airport authority.

Extra land was purchased to allow the base to expand. The parallel taxiway suitable for lighter fighter aircraft must be lengthened and hardened with concrete, and a parking ramp large enough to accommodate C-5 Galaxies or C-17 Globemaster IIIs is required.

The local community supports the program. Mr. Stuermer said mayors from local villages visited the Pentagon to express their continued support for the Air Force in the Eifel region where Spangdahlem is located. But the economic backlash of Bitburg's closure in 1994 still stings, he said.

Approximately \$40 million annually has made its way into the Eifel community since expansion began in earnest in 1997, Mr. Stuermer said. About 95 percent of all contracts have been awarded to local companies, and there is still plenty of work to go around. As of July 2003, the transition project was less than 20 percent complete at Spangdahlem.

The Eifel 2010 project is easy compared with the Rhein-Main project that Mr. Stuermer describes as "very tough" because of its non-negotiable

deadline of December 2005. Tough, but he sees no problem with Spangdahlem meeting its commitment.

## Ramping up at Ramstein

That same feeling of confidence is shared at Ramstein by Maj. Lisa Webster, the 86th Airlift Wing liaison officer for the transition program. As a C-130 pilot, she looks forward to increased operational capability when the base's current runway and taxiway expand into dual runways.

Mr. Thompson described the ability to keep operations going despite the closure of a single runway as "a tremendous capability." In decades past, the closure of an Air Force runway in Europe could be alleviated by sharing space at another base. Because of the military drawdown in the early 1990s, however, that has increasingly become less of an option.

Achieving that capability not only depends on the coordinated working relationship between the command and the 86th, but also the established Air Force, NATO and host nation partnership throughout this endeavor. Major Webster shares the latest transfer program information and serves as a conduit for coordination between the affected airlift wing organizations and the command during weekly meetings. She said these weekly meetings have paid dividends because timing is critical. One project often depends upon the completion of another, and the ripple effect could cause a wave of delays.

Coordination with overall planners is simple for her since she shares a sliver of an office alongside Mr. Thompson and other U.S. Air Forces in Europe planners. The information exchange in the two-story "box" office is fast, furious, widely varied and sometimes challenging.

For example, a German aviation law became an extraordinary challenge when it was apparent the air traffic would increase at Ramstein, and operations would change with the construction of a major wide-body parking ramp at Spangdahlem. This drove new air traffic act permits for both bases — unprecedented for U.S. forces in Germany, said Udo Bollmann, the command's host nation legal advisor. This permit was issued by the German government and determines important operational limits that must be observed in peacetime operations.

An air traffic act permit is required for developing an airfield or changing opera-

tions at an existing site. The permit wasn't an issue when U.S. air bases sprung up during the height of the Cold War, Mr. Bollmann said, but with the fall of the Berlin Wall its enforcement was put into the 1998 Status of Forces Agreement between Germany and the United States.

"Nobody knew how to do it," he said of the stringent permit requirements that included extensive examination of local health and environmental concerns. However, with the help of a German lawyer, the temporary setback was resolved.

Land became a second major issue: acquiring new land and preserving flora and fauna. Resistance came not only from individual landowners, but also from the association of land owners whose property was needed for air field expansion, said Willi Ningenlgen, the command's senior conservation engineer. However, agreements eventually were reached with about 200 citizens from four villages who sold the German government the land for base expansion. In other instances, land swaps were negotiated.

As for taking care of nature, replacing trees with more trees has been the environmental answer as compensation for cutting trees or other disturbances to almost 50 acres of affected wetlands. For example, if 50 trees are cut down, they must be replaced by planting 75 to allow for young transplants that don't survive.

Keeping a close eye on issues such as trees, however, doesn't prevent planners from focusing on the big picture. It can't, Mr. Thompson said, because one of the transition's major challenges is to "keep the program on track and on schedule." The key to that, he said, is "getting things done as quickly as you can."

Keeping on track has been accomplished through the hard work and cooperation of host nation officials and a "lot of good Air Force people working this [issue]," Mr. Thompson said. That's all the more impressive, he noted, because they had no template for the project and have adapted and learned along the way. However, he said the huge build-up at Aviano during the past several years, and the rapid construction of cruise missile sites during the mid-1980s in Europe, which he played a role in developing, served as useful historical references.

"You can't imagine the broad nature of problems we deal with," he said. But when asked about meeting the 2005 deadline, he acknowledged the challenge and said the team was "looking good." ☺

by Staff Sgt. Justin Pyle



**Soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry Regiment** wait to board a C-130 Hercules on Ramstein's ramp during a joint airdrop exercise. The C-130 mission transferred to Ramstein during the 1990s as part of the phased closure of Rhein-Main.

Heavy aircraft will become a more common sight at Ramstein when Rhein-Main closes, giving a facelift to European airlift operations as well as offering quality of life improvements to airmen and family members.