Extended term of service
KC-10 turns 25; introduced widebody tanker/cargo concept

The first 25 KC-10s were delivered in an eye-catching white and blue paint scheme. The KC-10 fleet switched to a less-conspicuous gray after the aircraft began supporting operations in potential combat areas.
By Larry Merritt

One fall morning 25 years ago, a U.S. Air Force tanker from Barksdale Air Force Base, La., refueled a B-52 bomber high above the Gulf of Mexico. It was the first operational squadron mission for the Air Force’s new advanced tanker/cargo aircraft, the KC-10A Extender.

Built in Long Beach, Calif., by McDonnell Douglas, now part of Boeing, the KC-10 was based on the commercial DC-10 Series 30 Convertible Freighter. The KC-10, which this year celebrates its 25th year of service, continues a 70-year tradition of DC airliners donning military paint.

The idea of a widebody commercial aircraft that could double as a military tanker and heavy-cargo transport originated in 1972. Using the first Boeing 747 fitted with a flying boom, the Air Force carried out a series of refueling trials. The tests proved jumbo jets would not only make excellent tankers to augment the KC-135 fleet but also could supplement C-5 and C-141 transports in the airlift role. The need for such an aircraft grew in 1975 when Air Force planners considered how to meet global commitments in future conflicts, should overseas refueling stops become off-limits to U.S. military cargo planes.

At first the Air Force considered buying a combination of 747s and DC-10s. But with billions of dollars trimmed from the defense budget, the Air Force could select only one. In 1977, it was announced that a military version of the DC-10 would carry out the new tanker/cargo mission. Officials cited price, life-cycle costs and maintainability as key selection criteria. Another factor was size: Smaller than the 747, the DC-10 could operate from more airports.

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