

151st AIR REFUELING SQUADRON



LINEAGE

151st Fighter Interceptor Squadron, extended federal recognition, 15 Dec 1957
Redesignated 151st Air Refueling Squadron, 18 Apr 1964

STATIONS

McGhee-Tyson ANGB, Knoxville, TN

ASSIGNMENTS

WEAPON SYSTEMS

Mission Aircraft

F-86D
F-86L, 1960
F-104A, 1960
F-104B
F-102A, 1963
TF-102A, 1963
KC-97G, 1964
KC-97L, 1965
KC-135A, 1976
KC-135E, 1982
KC-135R

Support Aircraft

C-45H
T-33A
C-47A
U-3A

ASSIGNED AIRCRAFT SERIAL NUMBERS

F-86D

51-8417

52-3679

F104

571296

57-1306

XX882

XX880

XX872

1306

60882

XX814

560811

F-102

70904

70867

KC-97

30150

30237

KC135

63609

XX1455

ASSIGNED AIRCRAFT TAIL/BASE CODES

UNIT COLORS

F-86: The tail and wing tank stripes were red out-lined by white

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

USAF Outstanding Unit Awards

1 Jul 1966-30 Jun 1968

1 Jul 1973-30 Jun 1975

1 Jul 1975-30 Jun 1976

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

Soon after the August 1957 Air Force announcement of the closing of McGhee Tyson Air Force Base; the National Guard Bureau announced the constitution of a new Air National Guard flying unit - the 134th Fighter Interceptor Group which would inherit all McGhee Tyson facilities, including the F-86s then stationed here, and assume the areas air defense mission. Federal recognition of the 134th came on 15 December 1957, and all on-base Air Force operations ceased on 8 January 1958. The Air National Guard had arrived in East Tennessee, officially taking over the base on 8 January 1958.

The Air National Guard tasked the 151st with protecting Oak Ridge in the event of a Soviet bomber attack.

The Air Force left behind 12 F-86D for the Tennessee Air Guard as it assumed the mission of the regular Air Force.

On 11 October 1958, 10 months after the unit was started, five pilots were placed on readiness alert in daylight hours. A readiness status that has been estimated would take as long as 2 years to achieve.

In January 1960 the first of what would prove to be many conversions to different type aircraft took place. The 134th switched from the F-86D to the F-86L.

On 1 January 1961, the unit assumed an Air Defense Command 14 hour Alert Commitment to continue guarding sensitive East Tennessee industry in the F-104. This commitment continued through the end of June 1961. On 1 July 1961, the Air Defense Command upgraded the units 14 hour to a 24 hour around the clock alert commitment.

The 700 members of the 134th Fighter Group reported for duty 1 November 1961, a part of about 155,000 guardsmen and reservists called to meet the crisis. The goal of the military buildup was to persuade the Soviets from interfering with Allied access to Berlin. Major Robert W. Aiken, the squadron commander, considered the mission of the National Guard reinforcements to be "serving the cause of peace just as effectively as any Strategic Air Command bomber on 15-minute alert." These Guardsmen from East Tennessee were tasked with shooting down any hostile aircraft which might attack from the eastern side of the iron curtain: "The primary mission is to prepare for and conduct air defense operations and day fighter operations as directed."

They would do so under the close radar guidance of American and German "fighter directors," to

use the German term, directing intercepts from ground radar stations. More specifically, they were to be ready to take off from Ramstein within 15 minutes of receiving orders to do so, primarily to protect unarmed aircraft flying in the Berlin air corridors from Soviet fighters.

Tennessee's Guardsmen formally mobilized on November 1 for a year of service. Leaving in groups rather than as one single deployment, a total of 450 deployed to Ramstein Air Base in the Federal Republic of Germany. The mobilization began with paperwork and the issuance of weapons at McGhee-Tyson. Guardsmen received winter uniforms, and officers, many of them new second lieutenants, purchased enough additional uniforms to last an entire year. By November 22, only 200 Guardsmen remained at McGhee-Tyson following the departure of 150 others in an Air Force transport. The Air Force wished to keep their destination a complete secret until everyone had reached their overseas base, but "departures [had] become common knowledge through families and friends of those who have already gone overseas, or are going shortly." The local newspaper reported that they were bound for Bitburg Air Base, but they were actually destined for Ramstein, a fact clarified by the 25th of the month. Orders to rush to the air base for the flight to West Germany often came suddenly, as with pilots who answered telephone calls in the middle of the night. All but 1 percent of the Guardsmen reported within 24 hours. The original plan was for the squadron's fighters to cross the Atlantic by flying from Knoxville to Argentia, Newfoundland, and from there to Lajes in the Azores before continuing on to Germany, but there was concern as to the safety and feasibility of such a crossing since the F-104 was a single engine aircraft. F-104 engines were known to suddenly quit mid-flight due to airflow problems. Restarting it was "almost impossible" at cruising altitude.

Several of the pilots flew practice flights 1,350 miles long over the United States in order to test the feasibility of this method of long distance flight. Since they encountered some mechanical difficulties, they were not confident that they could make it across the ocean safely. The squadron decided to dismantle their fighters, load them onto cargo aircraft, and reassemble them at Ramstein. The first of these large transports, a C-124, departed McGhee-Tyson on November 10. Ground crews pieced together the last of the F-104s in Germany on December 18. Following three flights each, the pilots were ready to assume their alert duties before all of the jets had been put back together and the squadron began flying missions on December 9. This was not the first time that F-104s had been sent on an overseas expedition in this way.

While all of the 134th Fighter Group was called to active duty, because of space limitations at the bases in Germany, an estimated 300 members of the Tennessee Guard unit were sent to overseas and stateside bases as fill-ins for other Guard and Air Force units.

On 10 November 1961, barely 10 days after the call to active duty, the first group of airmen of the 151st Fighter Interceptor Squadron boarded C-124 and were on their way to Ramstein.

Tennessee Air Guard lettering had been removed from their gleaming fuselage sides, and the newly painted U. S. Air Force markings proclaimed to everyone, that the Volunteers from Tennessee had joined with our regular Air Force counterparts in a united effort to stop this Communist threat.

Twenty-one pilots and ten aircraft deployed to Wheelus Air Base in Libya in February to practice firing weapons in the more favorable weather of the Mediterranean, a deployment that suggested the crisis had passed the moment of greatest danger. Six pilots remained at Ramstein. Most of the deployed jets remained air-worthy, but two collided with each other over Libya, killing both pilots in the process, and a third crashed because of an engine failure. Once the rest of the squadron returned to Germany, none of the jets were fully functional. They suffered from ejection seat and landing gear problems, as well as malfunctions of the missile firing system. In April, the readiness rate went up to ten aircraft out of 17, but then all were grounded when maintenance crews discovered that their landing gear doors would not close properly following takeoff. The squadron finally began to contribute consistently to the air defense of West Germany in May when all but two of the jets were flyable. It was declared "C-1, fully operationally ready," even receiving the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award, but that rating fell to "C-2, operationally ready" the next month because it did not have enough aircraft. Major Aiken found that efforts to extend the endurance of the F-104s through the use of under-wing fuel tanks hurt morale and prevented pilots from flying the aircraft to the limits of what it was made for speed. "It was our belief that the satisfaction of operating the aircraft in its best environment the high supersonic attacks is a contagious spirit that spreads throughout the unit, and ultimately affects the morale of every man.

In April of 1962, the 151st was selected to participate in a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exchange program with the Escadrill 10 Seine unit of the French Air Force. The French brought their Super Mystere fighter aircraft and support personnel to Ramstein, and the 151st took 104s and support personnel to Creil Air Base near Paris. The East Tennessee airmen flew side by side with the French at both locations.

During the month of May 1962, the 151st set an all time U. S. Air Force, Europe, jet fighter flying record of 836 hours 5 minutes. This was accomplished with but 17 aircraft being used for the first 30 days, and the 18th joining in on the last day, contributing but 4 hours and 30 minutes to the total. In addition, the unit had the highest flying time per aircraft assigned ever recorded in the Air Force for a jet fighter in any one month, an average per aircraft of 46 hours 27 minutes.

Although the mobilization came suddenly, the Guardsmen responded enthusiastically to federalization, with "less than four percent" asking to be exempt from the call-up. Many of them accepted considerable pay cuts as a result of the mobilization. If one was a college student, as were many from the 134th/151st, mobilization was good for the pocketbook. Forty-four of the Guardsmen were students at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville and had to leave their classes for active duty. The University extended every courtesy to the mobilized students, either offering them half credit or a full refund of their tuition fees. Others left lucrative jobs, such as Lieutenant Cecil Meek, Jr., and Captain John Ayers, both of whom were assistant district attorneys. They understood the "necessity for their service." Many were chomping at the bit. Major Joseph Davenport, an owner of a liquor store and a used car lot, exclaimed that "When the bosses in Washington say the word, I'm sure all of the fellows feel like I do: 'Let's go.' We're ready for combat, if that is what is going to be necessary to let the Russians and the world know we aren't to be pushed around."

Many National Guard wives followed their husbands to Europe, where the couples paid out of pocket for apartments in nearby villages. The commercial flight alone cost “nearly \$700.00 per adult, children somewhat less.” Whether to follow and keep the family in the same place or keep the family at home in familiar surroundings was normally “the first decision for the married Guardsman and his wife.” Families often struggled with reduced incomes while credit tightened. Most vexing was the attitude of unethical mechanics, the inaccessibility of National Guard rules on families’ rights and benefits, and appliances that broke at the most inopportune times. Nevertheless, morale overseas thrived even though the Tennesseans missed their families. They were pleased to be at a well-equipped base and were plenty busy. Their Air Force hosts scheduled sightseeing trips and welcomed them onto their sports teams. They also informed the Guardsmen not to be surprised if German families took them into their homes during Christmas, and warned them that some of the young women who made romantic advances to them were in all likelihood East German spies.

In April 1962 the Pentagon announced that it would soon begin to rotate National Guard units back to the United States since more Regular Air Force units were becoming available. The squadron got word in June that it was to return to McGhee-Tyson as soon as possible after June 20. This was earlier than had been planned, and they were leaving for the mundane requirement of runway repairs at Ramstein a cover story.

Just as they had back in November, the Guardsmen dismantled their jets and packed them in C-124s for the return to Tennessee. Even though the crisis simmered as the summer went on, the fact that the Americans were bringing National Guard forces home signaled that politicians were going to rely on efforts short of brinkmanship to at least come to terms with the Berlin Wall’s existence.

The unit returned to normal operations by summer’s end. On the 2nd of September the squadron flew in the air defense exercise Sky Shield III along with the Minnesota Air National Guard. Air Defense Command commented that “It is a credit to both organizations that they participated on a completely voluntary basis, Sunday, 2 September 1962 not being a drill day. . . . Both organizations are highly professional and each represents a major contribution to the air defense system.” Ten out of ten available F-104s flew, and all were ready to fly again when the exercise ended. Days later the squadron supported the Chicago Air Defense Sector during its operational readiness inspection. By September 20 it was back on alert status “fully operational,” a good thing since many Air Force squadrons were having difficulties reaching that standard while they converted to the new F-106. At all times one-third were ready to launch with just fifteen minutes notice not only to destroy Soviet bombers, but also to scatter to dispersal bases so as to avoid the growing Soviet missile threat. Even though much of the Air Force and Air National Guard mobilized during the Cuban Missile Crisis the next month, Alcoa’s ‘104s stayed put and continued their air defense duties. Its relationship with the Starfighter soon came to an end, for it began to exchange the glamorous jet for the slower but more versatile F-102 in February 1963.

The composition of the Tennessee Air National Guard pilots also illustrates a discontinuity with the past and the new nature of the Air National Guard. In effect, the Tennessee Air National Guard’s officer corps were national reservists; they were not carrying on the local militia

tradition. Their origins were in 25 different states. Most were college graduates with degrees from the Universities of Florida, New Hampshire, and Miami, for instance. Two opportunities drew them to Alcoa: the chance to fly the hottest jet in the arsenal, and the proximity of the University of Tennessee's graduate school. Some like Captain Bob Ruthstein of Chicago, had grown quite fond of his new home: "The farther I get away from East Tennessee, the less I like it. If we have to leave East Tennessee, I would prefer to be overseas." The great majority of the enlisted ranks and the non-flying officers were still locals and were a hodge-podge of businessmen, teachers, pharmacists, police and firemen, and a surgery resident at the University of Tennessee Hospital.

The challenge had been met. In March 1963, the 134th was called upon to give up their F-104s and establish an accelerated training program to train 8 instructor pilots and 45 maintenance men to form the nucleus of a new regular Air Force Squadron (the 319th Fighter Interceptor) at Homestead AFB, Florida, just across the Florida straits from Cuba. The Air Defense Command commended the 134th on the quality, efficiency and speed of the training.

East Tennesseans had grown accustomed to supersonic jet fighters operating in the skies over East Tennessee; but, soon an entirely different type of aircraft would be operating from McGhee Tyson.

In April 1964, the F-102s left and the 134th received the KC-97G, and changed from the Air Defense Command to the Tactical Air Command. This represented a total change in the mission for the Volunteers. There were no previously qualified aircrews or maintenance personnel assigned to the unit.

In August, the unit was tasked to furnish the first Pacific midpoint refueling of jet fighters between California and Hawaii with their new six-engine tankers. The unit participated in nine deployments to Alaska and Hawaii, one classified Southeast Asia mission, plus numerous CONUS and Caribbean exercises. In midyear 1967, the 134th began its longest deployment commitment Operation CREEK PARTY, at Rhein-Main Air Base near Frankfurt, Germany.

The KC-97L.S of the nine Air National Guard units that participated in Operation CREEK PARTY flew over 6,500 sorties, made more than 47,000 hook-ups and off loaded over 137 million pounds of jet fuel. CREEK PARTY was the first time that a reserve force in nonmobilized status had a continuing operational commitment in a foreign country. Operation CREEK PARTY signifies thousands of Atlantic crossings, and millions of miles flown on refueling tracks over Europe, consisting of nearly 70 percent of all the air refueling operations in Europe. These outstanding accomplishments were highlighted by ten years of accident free fighter refueling missions.

Desert Shield/Desert Storm

Just Cause, Deny Flight, Allied Force, Desert Fox, Joint Forge, Deliberate Forge, Northern Watch, Southern Watch

Noble Eagle, Enduring Freedom



Air Force Order of Battle
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Sources

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