

171 AIR REFUELING GROUP

MISSION

LINEAGE

171 Air Transport Group

Redesignated 171 Military Airlift Group, 15 Feb 1967

Redesignated 171 Aeromedical Airlift Group, 19 Feb 1968

Redesignated 171 Air Refueling Group, 4 Oct 1972

Inactivated

STATIONS

Coraopolis, PA

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS

Col George T. Bright

Col Donald W. Johnston

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

EMBLEM SIGNIFICANCE

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

In February of 1964, the 171st Air Transport Group was formed at Greater Pittsburgh Airport flying the C-121G. In 1968, the unit was redesignated as the 171st Aeromedical Airlift Group, the first of its kind in the Air National Guard (ANG). Later that year, the 171st was called to active duty to augment the airlift capability of the 375th Aeromedical Airlift Wing. Their mission was to move patients from casualty staging bases and military installations in Vietnam to destination treatment hospitals. Our Wing flew 35% of these missions, flying 510 sorties and airlifting 11,947 patients. The unit was finally released from active duty in December of 1968.

On 6 December 1965, the unexpected and shocking announcement was made that the 171st Air Transport Group was to be inactivated by October 1966. The reason given for the inactivation was an economy measure in the face of the rising cost of the Vietnam conflict. The specific explanation given for the inactivation of the 171st was that the combination of the 171st and 112th had saturated the Air National Guard facility. To increase the size of the Air Guard facility in order to accommodate a possible C-124 transport acquisition by the 171st would require further real estate purchase and construction money.

The inactivation notice set into action a determined effort at many levels to save the 171st. These efforts resulted in a one year postponement of the inactivation, followed one year later by another one year postponement. The value of the 171st soon became apparent and the Department of Defense quietly dropped all notions of an inactivation. In 1965, Congress passed a law mandating the number of Air National Guard units; inactivation of Air Guard units was no longer an immediate concern.

The unit's contribution to the Vietnam effort began in late 1965 with Operation "Christmas Star." This was an Air National Guard-wide mission taking cookies and other Christmas treats from local organizations and citizens, to the fighting troops in Vietnam. The airlift was so successful that it became the model for many more cargo airlift missions to Southeast Asia by transport units of the Air National Guard.

The 171st participated in these missions for a period of approximately one year, carrying high priority war material to various airfields in Southeast Asia. These missions were very demanding on the part of both aircrews and aircraft. The aircrews were airborne from 90 to 100 hours, and were absent from their civilian jobs for up to ten days. These missions were the first in history in which citizen-airmen, though not mobilized, served in a combat zone during time-off from their civilian jobs.

In September 1966, the requirement for domestic aeromedical evacuation was reduced to such a point that Air National Guard assistance was no longer required. The unit continued to fly the offshore aeromedical missions and stepped up the pace of aeromedical training,

military passengers, and cargo missions. The constant inter-changing of these various type missions caused maintenance and aircrew personnel many hours of work configuring the aircraft for the mission at hand to be flown. Passenger seats had to be installed or disassembled, cargo handling equipment properly positioned, or delicate aeromedical equipment added or removed.

A date that will always be remembered by 672 members of the 171st Aeromedical Airlift Group is 11 April 1968. They were among 24,000 Reserve Forces personnel called up by the President of the United States. The specific reason for the call-up of the 171st AAGP was the increase in casualties in the Vietnam fighting and the forthcoming conversion of some of the regular Air Force units to the C-9.

Events moved swiftly after the call-up order was given, and on 12 April, personnel processing began. By 13 May, the first call-up day, the unit was fully manned. One hundred and seven officers and 565 enlisted personnel were facing a possible two-year tour of active duty. The active duty tour was to be performed at home station with a few exceptions. Ten airmen were given Permanent Change of Station (PCS) orders to Korea, one legal officer was reassigned to Hq 21st AF, McGuire AFB, New Jersey, and five navigators were assigned thirty-day rotation TDY tours to the 375th AAWg for flight planning.

The first live aeromedical missions began on 14 May under the direction of the 375th AAWg, Scott AFB, Illinois. The 171st gained responsibility for airevac missions in the eastern United States and portions of Texas. In addition, the pace of the continuing offshore aeromedical mission was accelerated. The frequency of the missions increased to the point where the unit was operating 28 percent of all the 375th AAWg missions and moving 35 percent of the domestic patient load. The unit was also required to maintain an aircraft and keep a complete aircrew available at home station for short-notice emergencies. The "Alert Bird" handled an average of six special missions a month. The typical aeromedical mission required a sixteen-hour workday for the aircrew, eight hours of which was flying time. There could be over six enroute stops to load and unload patients and passengers. After fifteen hours of rest, the crew would be back in the air on another similar mission. This routine went on for months.

The outstanding results achieved by the flying squadron would not have been possible without the skilled devotion of the various maintenance sections. The unit went into the mobilization very short of critical spare parts, especially engines.

The unit was demobilized on 12 December 1968 after serving a seven-month tour of active duty. The final results of the call-up were very impressive, with a total of 510 missions flown amounting to 4735 accident-free flying hours. A total of 11,947 patients and over 2000 space-available passengers were airlifted.

The unit now reverted to precall-up type operations. The only aeromedical missions that were flown were the offshore CONUS runs and a few missions to Europe. As the regular Air

Force Aeromedical Evacuation units became more proficient in their new C-9 aircraft, they took over all aeromedical missions. The last aeromedical missions flown by the 171st occurred in early 1969, although aeromedical training continued.

The results of Operation "Creek Guardlift" were impressive. Twenty-five thousand passengers and 700,000 pounds of cargo were transported with a reliability rate of over 95 percent. Approximately 2800 accident/incident-free flying hours were flown over the route structure. This does not include the flying time involved deploying to and from Torrejon. The record is even more impressive considering most participants were Air Guardsmen on a part-time status. All six flying units received the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award for their excellent performance in Operation "Creek Guardlift."

During the nine years flying the Connie, seven meaningful awards were conferred upon the 171st. In 1959, the National Guard Bureau Flight Safety Citation was presented and earned again every year thereafter. In 1960, the Military Airlift Command Safety Plaque was presented and, again, earned every year until leaving the Command. In 1966, the unit achieved the MAC Five Year Safety Award. The National Guard Bureau Citation of Merit for Southeast Asia Support was awarded in 1967. In 1968, the 375th AAWg Flying Safety Plaque was received for accident-free flying for a ten-year period. The unit's second Air Force Outstanding Unit award was presented for the period of January 1968 to December 1969 for the heavy involvement in aeromedical airlift missions. The third Air Force Outstanding Unit Award for "Creek Guardlift" efforts was bestowed in 1972.

There were sad faces, this time as the eight beautiful Constellations, now with 20,000 flying hours on each airframe, departed Pittsburgh for Davis Monthan never again to grace the skies.

USAF Unit Histories
Created: 12 Mar 2021
Updated:

Sources
Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.