

117 AIR REFUELING SQUADRON



MISSION

LINEAGE

440 Bombardment Squadron (Medium) constituted, 19 Jun 1942

Activated, 26 Jun 1942

Redesignated 440 Bombardment Squadron (Light), 3 Feb 1945

Inactivated, 4 Jan 1946

Redesignated 117 Bombardment Squadron (Light) and allotted to ANG, 24 May 1946

Extended federal recognition, 20 Dec 1948

Inactivated

Activated as 117 Fighter Interceptor Squadron, 23 Feb 1957

Redesignated 117 Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, 10 Apr 1958

Redesignated 117 Bombardment Squadron, 12 Jun 1972

Redesignated 117 Defensive Systems Evaluation Squadron, 6 Apr 1974

Redesignated 117 Air Refueling Squadron, 8 Jul 1978

STATIONS

Barksdale Field, LA, 26 Jun 1942

Harding Field, LA, 8-27 Aug 1942

Shipdham, England, 12 Sep 1942

Horsham St Faith, England, 4-21 Oct 1942

St-Leu, Algeria, 10 Nov 1942

Tafaraoui, Algeria, 18 Nov 1942

Maison Blanche, Algeria, 21 Nov 1942

Teleergma, Algeria, 18 Dec 1942

Oujda, French Morocco, 3 Mar 1943

Rabat/Sale, French Morocco, 25 Apr 1943

Sedrata, Algeria, 1 Jun 1943
Djedeida, Tunisia, 26 Jun 1943
Decimomannu, Sardinia, 1 Nov 1943
Serragia, Corsica, 21 Sep 1944-9 Jan 1945
Bradley Field, Conn, 25 Jan 1945
Columbia AAB, SC, 28 Feb-27 Apr 1945
Kadena, Okinawa, 2 Jul 1945
Machinato, Okinawa, 21 Jul-8 Dec 1945
Ft Lawton, WA, 2-4 Jan 1946
Philadelphia MAP, PA
NAS Hutchinson, KS
Topeka, KS

ASSIGNMENTS

319 Bombardment Group, 26 Jun 1942
VII Bomber Command, 18 Dec 1945-4 Jan 1946

WEAPON SYSTEMS

Mission Aircraft

B-26, 1942
B-25, 1944
A-26, 1945
O-38
L-1
BC-1
O-47
L-4
F-51
F-84
F-80
RB-57A, 1958
B-57, 1972
EB-57
KC-135

Support Aircraft

AT-6
B-26
L-5
C-47
C-45
C54
T-39

COMMANDERS

LTC Roy J. Carrow, Jr.

Maj Charles M. Baier, Jr., 19 May 1980

LTC William F. Lyle, Jr.

LTC Thomas Spencer

HONORS

Service Streamers

None

Campaign Streamers

Algeria-French Morocco, with Arrowhead

Tunisia

Sicily

Naples-Foggia

Anzio

Rome-Arno

Southern France

North Apennines

Air Combat, EAME Theater

Air Offensive, Japan

Ryukyus

China Offensive

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

Distinguished Unit Citations

Rome, Italy, 3 Mar 1944

Florence, Italy, 11 Mar 1944

French Croix de Guerre with Palm

Apr, May, and Jun 1944

EMBLEM



To some extent, the 117 inherited this first unit insignia. The 117 predecessor unit, in Pennsylvania had used an owl motif, and the unit in Kansas kept this. There were changes though, to reflect both the individuality of the unit and the reconnaissance mission. Sgt Zerger of Maintenance redrew the owl, and it now plainly bore radio equipment on his back and a camera in his claws.





MOTTO

NICKNAME

How and why the 190th became known as the Kansas Coyotes. Finding out why was a harder task than it appeared. Many stories seem to suggest that the name originated in Hutchinson from the times when they used to have to chase the coyotes off the runway so that the planes could land. These were known by the men as "Coyote Runs." From this we must assume that the Coyotes have always been with us, but I believe the most complete information comes from Dave Render. Dave says that shortly after they moved to Topeka, they began to see coyotes on the runway here also. It became a standard joke with Bill Miller when he was leaving on a mission he would say he was "going out to see the coyotes." When the Air Force required that the 190th have a specific name for their Mobile Control unit to differentiate the 190th Mobil Control from the Air Force Mobile Control at Forbes, Bill Miller suggested it be known as "Coyote Mobile." Coyote Mobile became the call sign in approximately 1968 or '69.

Around 1976 or '77 it was decided that our unit should have a logo. Other units had names that they went by such as the Green Mountain Boys and the Happy Hooligans. It was believed that this would bring an extra measure of pride to the unit. The idea was presented to Duane Zerger and he once again came up with the needed design. Since Mobile Control used the name Coyote when talking to the tower we were already halfway known as Coyotes, hence, it was decided that we should be known as the Kansas Coyotes. One idea led to another and it was finally decided that the coyote symbol be emblazoned on an outline of the state of Kansas, with a blue star in the Northeast corner of the state depicting Topeka.

Then began an all-out campaign to let it be known to everyone who we were. The coyote was painted on the planes. Decals were purchased and the men of the 190th carried them everywhere they went, sticking them in every conceivable place. A coyote was captured and the men in Operations paid to have him stuffed. The stuffed mascot sat in the break room of Operations and startled many an unsuspecting visitor. He was transported to state conventions

and proudly displayed as our mascot. After conversion to KC-135s even the monthly publication of the 190th changed its name from the Canberra Log to the Kansas Coyote Log. Also with the KC-135 mission came the opportunity to not only leave our decals all over the air but in many places around the world as well.

OPERATIONS

The unit began in 1942 as the 440th Bombardment Squadron, Light. This was a B-26 unit, working from North Africa, Sicily, Italy and France during the war in Europe. For precision bombing over Casino and Naples it received a Presidential Unit Citation. With the end of the war in Europe, the 440th was transferred to Okinawa, where it took part in the bombardment of Japan. In October of 1945, with the end of the war, the 440th was deactivated by the Army Air Force. The Squadron was then reorganized as the 117 Bombardment Squadron, Light, of the Pennsylvania Air National Guard, stationed at Philadelphia Municipal Airport. In April 1951, the 117 was called to active duty for the Korean War. It served as a training unit at Langley Air Force Base, Va. With the end of the war, the Squadron was returned to the Pennsylvania Air National Guard, and redesignated a Fighter Interceptor Squadron. Over the next few years, though, the 117 was unable to maintain the minimum required strength, (60% of authorized). Finally the decision was reached to remove the unit from the Pennsylvania quota, and add it to that of Kansas, which seemed to offer more hope.

1 Apr 1951: Called to active duty as part of the Korean War call-up and soon transferred to Langley AFB, VA, where it served as a B-26 training unit.

1 Jan 1953: Returned to state control to be reorganized at Philadelphia MAP as the 117 FBS and equipped with Lockheed F-80Cs.

1 Jul 1955: Redesignated 117 FIS. Jan 1957: 117 FIS inactivated due to inability to maintain the required minimum personnel strength. Designation transferred to the Kansas

The 117 Squadron was a Pennsylvania ANG unit for just over eight years. As the 117 Bombardment Squadron (Light) it flew Douglas B-26Bs and B-26Cs for four years before converting to F-80Cs in January 1953.

By the fall of 1956, the first steps were being taken for the eventual organization of the 117 in Kansas, though the official transfer was still several months away. First, a cadre of trained and experienced Air Guardsmen had to be found. This was easy enough. The 127th Fighter-Interceptor squadron, Kansas Air National Guard, was already in existence in Wichita, at McConnell Air Force Base. The creation of a new unit would offer a chance of promotion to many of the men of the old unit, if they transferred. These arguments appealed especially to the Guard's full time employees, the Air Technicians. From the same unit, a commander could also be found. Major Carl L. "Curly" Boggs, commander of the 137th Maintenance and Supply Group, and Chief of Maintenance of the 127th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, was evidently experience enough to handle a new squadron, and was well-liked by the men of the 127th who would form the cadre. As one said, looking back, "A lot of them came to Hutchinson to follow

Curly Boggs.”

While the new Squadron now had (or at least would have) a commander, there were still a few details to be decided. The first was equipment. The 117 would remain a fighter-interceptor squadron, and as such would be equipped with F-80 and the T-33, with the prospect of more modern equipment at a later date. The choice of equipment and location (Kansas) between them settled the place of the 117 in the Air Force chain of command. It would become the 4th squadron of the 137th Fighter-Interceptor Wing, Kansas and Oklahoma Air National Guard. The existing three squadrons were the 127th in Wichita, and other in Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

Now all the unit needed was a home. There were a number of possible sites in Kansas at that time; Shilling AFB (Salina); McConnell AFB (Wichita), Forbes AFB (Topeka) and Hutchinson Naval Air Station, Hutchinson. McConnell already had the 127th, and an additional squadron would have left both units with difficulties in recruiting. Schilling and Forbes were both somewhat crowded at the time. Hutchinson had all its buildings full at the moment, but there was room for more on base. Besides, it already had an Air Force radar detachment, which was something that the 117 would need as an operation fighter-interceptor squadron. So Major Boggs and various other technicians of the 127th prepared to move their families to Hutchinson.

Hutchinson NAS was about 12 miles from the actual town of Hutchinson, (population: 40,000). It had been built during the Second World War to take advantage of the generally good flying weather of Kansas. Deactivated at the end of the war, it had been reactivated and to some extent rebuilt for the Korean War. By 1956 it was no longer as active as it once was and there was some hope that a small augmented squadron could be fitted in. The announcement that the 117 would be formed at Hutchinson was made by Air Defense Command on 3 January 1957, a Thursday. By the following Monday, a headquarters and recruiting center was in operation at 23 ½ East First St., in the Air Force Filter Center.

The aircraft assigned to the 117 were parked at McConnell Air Force Base, Kans., since the Navy had no hangar space to spare initially. The pilots and mechanics had to commute to Wichita for weekend drills and daily flying. The remainder of the small unit met in a Quonset hut in downtown Hutchinson, since the Navy could find no available space in Hutchinson NAS. Finally, in April, part of Building 303 became the orderly room and base supply. Unit supply was at 707 West 7th, still in downtown Hutchinson, so the unit was pretty thoroughly scattered on a UTA. We might note that the bins unit supply acquired in this period have become some of the most enduring components of the unit. They have traveled from West 7th to East 2nd to Hutchinson ANGB, and then to two locations in Topeka, finally settling (or at least resting) at Building 451, with a move to Building 662 already planned. By late June 1958. While not at full-authorized strength, the 117 was now close enough to be thought of as a functioning unit.

Maj Carl L. Boggs, was transferred to the newly created 117 Fighter-Interceptor Squadron, Hutchinson, Kansas, as Commander, 23 February 1957. All assigned personnel of the 137th Organizations were reassigned to either the 127th or 117 Fighter Interceptor Squadrons.

The State of Kansas was successful in bidding for the allocation of a second Air National Guard flying unit. The 117 Fighter Interceptor Squadron, previously assigned to the Pennsylvania ANG, was to become a Kansas ANG unit and located at the U.S. Naval Air station, south of Hutchinson, Kansas.

Maj Gen Joe Nickell, the Adjutant General of Kansas, in conjunction with the USAF Air Defense Command, announced on 3 January 1957, that the 117 FIS would be formed at Hutchinson, Kansas. The unit would fly the F-80, with the Air Defense Command as the gaining major command and would be assigned to the 137th Fighter-Interceptor Wing, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Through the coordinated efforts of the National Guard Bureau, Col Edward R. Fry, Assistant Adjutant General for Air, and Lt Col J.E. Gardner, Executive Support Staff Officer, the 127th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron was given the responsibility of assisting with the initial manning and equipping of the new unit.

The 117 Fighter-Interceptor Squadron initially was authorized manpower positions for 45 officers and 417 enlisted personnel. Federal recognition of the new unit in Kansas required a minimum personnel assigned strength of 20 percent of the total authorized. This computed that, at least, a total of 92 personnel were required to receive federal recognition for the unit.

Personnel recruiting, under the leadership of Capt Paul F. Simmons, and assisted by Airman Second Class (A2C) James R. Patterson and other 127 FIS members, began early in January 1957. The recruiting activities were conducted from an office located in downtown Hutchinson. To provide the nucleus of command/technicians for the new organization, a small cadre of seven officers and 18 enlisted men were transferred from the 127th to the 117 FIS.

In addition to Maj Carl L. "Curly" Boggs, assigned as Squadron Commander and Air Commander (Air Technician), other 127 FIS personnel that were reassigned were: Capt Anthony A. Leis, Supply Officer; Capt Paul F. Simmons, Executive Officer; 1st Lt Robert C. Brown, Fighter Pilot; 1st Lt Donald W. McEachern, Comptroller; 1st Lt James M. Sherman, Fighter Pilot; 2nd Lt Kenneth D. Meyer, Fighter Pilot; MSgt Carl E. Batchelor, Supply; MSgt Richard T. Fegley, Transportation; MSgt Orville D. Marsh, Aircraft Maintenance; MSgt Ronald H. Zimbelman, Aircraft Maintenance; TSgt Harold H. Hermiston, Aircraft Electronic Maintenance; SSgt Mervin C. Boggs, Personal Equipment; SSgt Ronald D. Persing, Aircraft Maintenance; AIC Richard A. Rayl, Air Police; Al C David J. Reichenberger, Supply; Airman Second Class Donato J. Alonzo, Welder; A2C John W. Annett, Aircraft Maintenance; A2C Barrett L. Knoll, Supply; A2C Sylvester J. Mies, Jr. Supply; A2C Dennis D. Mitchell, Supply; A2C William G. Nyquist, Supply; A2C James R. Patterson, Personnel; Airman Third Class (A3C) Anthony R. Alonzo, Transportation; A3C Stuart L. Roberts, Aircraft Maintenance. In addition to the personnel reassigned from the 127th FIS, the recruiting effort was successful in the appointment of five new officers, all aircrew pilots, and the enlistment of 43 prior service and 22 non prior service Airmen. The 117 FIS was granted Federal Recognition on 23 February 1957, with 11 commissioned and 83 enlisted members.

By the end of June 1957, there were 12 officers assigned and the enlisted expanded to 153. Included in these newer members was MSgt Melvin D. Simpson who was enlisted on 16 March 1957, as the 95th enlisted member, and assigned as the Squadron First Sergeant; he was also employed in a compatible air technician position.

In March and April 1957, there were three more personnel transferred from the 127th FIS; MSgt Kenneth L. Homer, Aircraft Maintenance; TSgt Emmett W. Buckman, Firefighting Section; TSgt Virgil L. Keller, Aircraft Maintenance.

During the 12-month period, 1 May 1957 to 30 April 1958, the final nine phased transfers of 127 FIS personnel to the 117 FIS was completed. They were: 1st Lt Lyle E. Goltz, Supply Officer; MSgt Revoe M. Rasmusson, Aircraft Maintenance; TSgt Wallace E. Gilbert, Aircraft Refueling; SSgt Harry A. Conrad, Ground Support Equipment; SSgt James F. Hephner, Aircraft Maintenance, SSgt Robert E. Triplett, Sheet Metal; Al C Gerald E. Rodman, Jet Engine; A2C Donald L. Knoll, Supply; and A3C Richard C. Grace, Air Police.

Although the 127 FIS and its successor organizations were destined to remain in the Fighter Interceptor/Tactical Fighter missions as far into the future as can be foretold, the 117 FIS was to enjoy only a short year in that mission.

From the unit's conception in Kansas, the National Guard Bureau had intended to replace the F-80s with F-84 aircraft. The runways at Hutchinson were only 7500 feet, , and were a bit short for the safe operation of F-84 aircraft.

To maintain the Fighter Interceptor mission for the 117th, the NGB then slated F-86 as the replacement for the F-80s. , this plan was again scrapped before any actions were taken and a decision was made to equip the 117 with RB-57

8 February 1958 marked another victory for the 117th, the first of the unit's F-80s arrived at HNAS, more than a year after the creation of the unit. It was not necessary to build hangars for them, as had been planned. The Navy was in the process of closing down HNAS. They had announced the closing in April of 1957, and the Navy was to be out by July of 1958.

On 10 April 1958, the unit was redesignated as the 117 Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, with a primary mission of bomb damage assessment and photo reconnaissance; assigned to the 123rd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, Louisville, Kentucky. Tactical Air Command (TAC) was the gaining major command.

In April 1958, the first of the new aircraft arrived. It was a B model, released by the Air Forces 38 Bomb Squadron in Lyon, France. Ultimately, the Squadron was scheduled to receive 12 B models and one C. The Bs were designed for one pilot and a navigator, and the Cs were the dual-control pilot training modifications.

The move was barely in time for the F-80s. From the beginning, they had been regarded as

transitional aircraft. Initially, the intention had been to replace them with F-84s, but the runway at Hutchinson (7500 feet) was a little short for that. Then the 117 was slated for F-86Ds, that would make use of the Air Force radar detachment already at the base.

This being a strictly wartime and strictly local function, there was no point in budgeting such units from the limited resources of the regular Air Force. They could be performed just as well by members of the Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve. This was where the 117 came into the picture. It was clearly due to be reequipped. It was located at a base unlikely to be priority target for a Russian first strike, and it was located more or less centrally for reconnaissance over a large part of the central United States. Soon a decision was reached: B-57s from demobilized Bomb Squadrons would be reworked in RB-57s and assigned to various Guard and Reserve units, among them the 117 Fighter-Interceptor, soon to be renamed the 117 Photo Reconnaissance Squadron

The new airplanes brought a new name and a new assignment, the first, being with the Louisville Wing. It became a part of the 127th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing along with the 107 and 171 TRS (Detroit) and the 172 (Battle Creek) for less than a year and then returned to the Louisville Wing. The 117th, now assigned to the Continental Air Command, was the 117 Photo-Reconnaissance Squadron. The primary mission was now bomb damage survey and photoreconnaissance in event of enemy attack. The unit also had a secondary mission of photo mapping and was capable of an additional peacetime mission of radar calibration.

In July 1958, the unit had its first accident. Lt. "Bill" Miller was flying in the front seat of a B-57 for the first time, making touch-and-go landings for practices. Just as Lt. Miller was giving his engines power after touching the runway, the left engine virtually exploded into flames. It very nearly cartwheeled, and only the expertise of Lt. Miller's instructor, an old Air Force type, kept it from doing so. "It was an outstanding piece of airmanship," said Major Boggs, years afterward. In the meantime, the crash crew was already responding. It was Major Boggs' order that a crash fire truck be out by the runway with its engine running any time such training was in process, and this time it paid off. They were on the scene within about 20 seconds, saving the lives of both crewmen and most of the plane. The wing itself, though, was beyond hope. For more than half a year, the bird would remain at Hutchinson with one wing, a reminder that while it might all be practice, it wasn't all fun and games.

The B-57s with which they were training, though, were just temporary. The first arrival in April, and in July word came down that the 117 would be receiving the RB-57As, a special photoreconnaissance modification. The first of them would arrive in August 1958, while the 117 was on its first summer camp as a Tac Recon Squadron.

In the spring of 1962, six aircrew members and approximately 20 maintenance personnel departed Hutchinson for the South Pacific to participate in Project Blue Straw. Blue Straw was the atmospheric testing of nuclear radiation within the mushroom cloud following a nuclear explosion.

Enroute to the South Pacific, personnel of the 117 arrived first at Kirtland AFB, New Mexico, to receive indoctrination on the mission to receive their aircraft assignments. Two of the aircrafts flown by members of the 117th, 52-1500 and 52-1504, then assigned to the Test Squadron at Kirtland, were to turn up 12 years later, in 1974, assigned to the 190th. The B-57s were configured with ferry tanks and pylon tanks so they would have sufficient fuel to make the flight from Travis AFB, Calif. to Hickam, Hawaii. Flying time was six hours and all aircraft arrived at Hickam without incident. Aircraft were refueled and preceded on to their operating base on Christmas Island. Six weeks later, the required tests had been completed and the detachment returned to Kirtland and members of the 117 were released and returned to Hutchinson.

The commitment of Canberras to Vietnam would ultimately provide new missions and different aircraft for the 190th. This process started with the commitment of a small detachment (never more than six planes) of RB-57Es in 1963. In August of 1964, following the Tonkin Gulf incident, 36 additional aircraft, mostly B-57s, were sent to Bien Hoa. The commitment of a B-57 force to Vietnam posed difficulties for the Air Force. The last active duty squadrons flying Canberras as bombers were deactivated in 1959. Now they had to find a system for providing combat ready crews from the Vietnam units, and Air Force training facilities were already being overtaxed by the Vietnam buildup.

The regular Air Force turned to the most experienced Canberra-flying unit in the nation to solve the dilemma. The 190th was granted additional funds for parts, and fuel, and permitted additional technician strength. In return, it undertook to train virtually every one of the early Canberra crews committed to Vietnam. At the peak of the activity, six two-man (pilot and navigator) teams were being trained monthly. All told, the 190th trained 119 pilots and navigators for Vietnam, under a variety of programs and code names known collectively as "Combat Cranberry." The training took 35 to 65 days, depending on other training received, and was intended to make the regulars almost as proficient as the weekenders.

On Tuesday, 20 Aug. 1963, Captains Charles W. Simmonds and Clenn J Biberstein were approaching Hutchinson at the end of a training mission. Fifteen miles southwest of Hutchinson, the canopy blew off. It was meant to do so prior to ejection, but no explanation has been given as to why it did so then. In any event, it was disastrous. 300-mile-an-hour winds entered the cockpit, sweeping away Capt Simmonds' helmet and injuring his face. Capt. Biberstein, behind and below, was somewhat less exposed. He fought his way forward, and seeing the situation, gave his helmet to Simmonds. Voice communication was impossible in the cockpit, so Simmonds wrote on his kneepad, "No elevator control – Get out." As Biberstein explained it later, Simmonds was the boss, and in any event there was nothing else he could do. He returned to his seat and ejected. Despite the helmet Simmonds had been given, he made no communication with Hutchinson. Perhaps there was no time, or perhaps the radio – like the elevator controls, had not survived the hurricane winds. At 3:22 p.m. he crashed into a field southwest of town, still at the controls of his crippled aircraft, and presumably still trying to bring it home intact. The plane buried itself in a trench 40 feet long and 8 feet deep, and Capt. Charles W. Simmonds, at the age of 30 become the first member of the 190th to perish in the performance of his duties.

11 Aug 1967: Completed move from MAS Hutchinson to Forbes AFB.

November of 1968 was a sad time for at least some of the 190th. Good old 42-93173, the KANG "Gooney Bird," was handed over to the Georgia Air National Guard. Boggs had himself accepted it from the Navy in March of 1947, and flew it from 1947 to 1956. He lost it then with his transfer to the 117th, but the faithful bird followed along, coming to the 190th by 1966. By the time the 190th was due up for more modern equipment; it had logged 10,199 hours, and gone through at least 10 pair of engines.

In January of 1972, though, a different announcement was made. Instead of the RF-4s, the 190th was to have the B-57Gs being withdrawn from Vietnam. There were 14 left of the original 16. It was something of a blow, but the Pentagon's reasoning was sound enough. The G models were to remain in the inventory and in use, so that the equipment could be studied and used elsewhere if needed. Someone had to fly the planes, and the regular Air Force was already losing units. It would have to be a reserve or guard unit, and what unit in the country knew more about the B-57 than the 190th TRG, whose A models were due to be replaced in any event? By late spring, 1972, Vietnam vets (actually from Udorn AFB, Thailand) were appearing at Forbes Field.

In May of 1972, the RB-57s, which the unit had flown for almost 14 years, began their last flight. Ten of them went to Aberdeen Proving Ground for a destruction-testing program. The remainder of the unit went to Davis-Monthan AFB, where they sit on a runway yet. It was a sad day for many of the men of the 190th, especially the pilots. As LtCol Render put it, "I've had this bird for quite a few years. I'm proud of it." There was work to be done, men to train, even a new unit insignia to go up everywhere, but the predominant tone was set by one of the pilots: "You know, you feel a little sad."

On 12 June 1972, the unit began a new mission under a new name. The 190th TRG became the 190th Bomb Group (Tactical). It became a night bombardment force, armed with the only B-57Gs in the world.

By June 1972, the 190th Tactical Bombardment Squadron, Air National Guard, at Forbes AFB, Kansas, had fourteen B-57G aircraft-- 10 returned from Southeast Asia and 4 transferred from MacDill Air Force Base. The Air Force had provided 42 active duty personnel and 5 contractor technicians to assist the Air National Guard during the transition to the B-57G, and maintenance personnel were reinstalling the sensors and equipment that had been removed for the ferry flight from Southeast Asia. While the transition proceeded, the Air Staff took one more look at the B-57G

On 19 June 1972, the Tactical Division, Deputy Chief of Staff for Plans and Operations, at Air Force headquarters summarized the Air Force's reasons for leaving the B-57Gs with the Air National Guard. Most significantly, such action kept the aircraft and support equipment in a combat-ready status and available for any short-notice contingency that might arise. Keeping

the aircraft operational also insured the availability of vehicles for continued evaluation of the various sensors and techniques associated with self-contained night attack technology. The active duty and National Guard personnel assigned to the squadron formed a pool of trained technicians to support the system should it be needed in a combat situation. All of those factors supported the Secretary of Defense's policy of providing the Air National Guard with modern equipment and meaningful missions. Finally, keeping the B-57Ge active averted undesirable political reactions that might result from the early phase-out of such a widely publicized and expensive system.

Not everyone accepted or agreed with those reasons. General Eade preferred to retire the B-57Gs to storage at Davis Monthan Air Force Base, but conceded that if the Air National Guard needed the airframes just for something to fly, they could keep the B-57Gs until something better became available.

After spending 4 months deciding to create the B-57G, the Air Force took 6 months to identify the necessary funds and 27 months to modify and test the aircraft. Those 37 months of preparation yielded 18 months of combat. Throughout the program, the B-57G had advocates such as General Schinz and the Southeast Asia Projects Division, and such opponents as General Momyer, who interposed objections in 1968 and again in 1970. The B-57G emerged from a high priority program directed by the Air Staff that circumvented at least half of the Air Force Systems Command's normal development cycle. Because the B-57G was the only tactical bomber in the Air Force inventory, the development program was monitored by a systems project office whose usual primary concern was cargo aircraft.

The B-57G never equaled expectations. The airframe measured up to the planning criteria, but the sensors and associated equipment failed in most respects. The B-57G cost twice the estimated \$52 million, and the expected 18 months from contract award to deployment stretched to 27 months. Because the moving target indicator feature of its radar never functioned, the B-57G had no long-range sensor. And finally, the B-57G never achieved the promised kill rate of 6.9 trucks per sortie and 79 trucks per day.

As American forces were being withdrawn one unit at a time from SEA, most if not all the B-57Gs were flown to Clark on 12 April 1972. A month later they were ferried to the 190th Tactical Bombardment Group of the Kansas Air National Guard at Topeka. (The 13th Bomb Squadron was no longer manned or equipped but the squadron remained on the active list until 30 September 1973.) After two years of service with the ANG, the 'Gs' were retired to the reclamation depot in 1974, and after a time were scrapped.

The greatest burden in the change fell on armament, maintenance and aircrew elements. Navigators were changed to weapons systems officers, new weapons had to be learned and maintained, and complex new electronic equipment had to be mastered. This included forward-looking radar and infrared detection systems, low light level television, and a weapons delivery computer. Much of this equipment is now in widespread use, but in 1972 it was first generation and experimental – that is, heavy, bulky and complex. Much sympathy should go to the pilots,

though. Where the RB-57As had been a dream to fly, and long-range aircraft, the G's carried much more weight (about three tons) and carried it very poorly. Of necessity, most of it was concentrated in the nose, so the controls had to be fought every moment to keep the aircraft on course. Nor were the missions anything to compensate for this. They consisted of endless runs over the same nearby bombing range where, so the pilots claim, the weapons systems officers had all the fun.

On 21 Dec 1972, Captain Armour, pilot and 1st Lt Chapman were taking off as the second aircraft in a four-ship flight when the right engine exploded. Both crewmen ejected safely from the crippled aircraft.

While the unit was still adapting to a new aircraft and unit mission, the Air Force complicated life by deactivating Forbes AFB. By October 1973, the men and women of the 190th were moving about the abandoned buildings of Forbes like the last few inhabitants of a budding ghost town. Forbes AFB was only briefly Forbes ANGB, though. Soon the bulk of the old SAC installation was sold to the city of Topeka, and the 190th began its retreat into the north end of the base, which continues as of this writing. By late 1978 or early 1979, the entire unit will be in a compound of its own, and all functions will be in walking distance of one another. Being the host unit of Forbes, though, imposed numerous responsibilities on the men of the 190th through two changes in equipment.

The drive to make the ANG section of Forbes a compact, self-sufficient base had involved the largest construction program far in the history of the unit. An estimated 5.7 million dollars are being spent to put up new buildings or renovate existing ones. (No doubt the construction of a two-story structure for maintenance, supply and dispensary within Hangar 662 fits one or the other of the categories). Not only will these structures make the 190th more efficient by providing better facilities, they will greatly reduce the wasted time spent going from one section to another. At the same time, concentrating the unit functions will make it possible to establish an effective perimeter guard and limit access to the base. It was not clear, when the projects first go underway, how important this ability would soon become.

Some of the construction has been in the planning stage longer than other parts. When the 190th was stationed at Hutchinson, plans were made for certain new buildings, and some blueprints were actually drawn up, only to be shelved when the unit was redeployed to Forbes AFB. Six years later, when the 190th once more the only flying unit assigned to its home field, the plans were dusted off and the buildings constructed.

Long before the building program got underway, though, the 190th had more changes to face. In April 1974, less than two years after the conversion from reconnaissance to bombing, the 190th changes mission and name again. From the interdiction of hostile supply lines, the 190th converted to the penetration of the friendly air defenses. It was actually a reversion to operation "Eye-opener." By skillful flying and the use of electronic counter-measures (ECM) the 190th and the 158th (Vermont ANG) together with a squadron of regulars, were to find out how tough American air defenses were.

Units operating these specially equipped EB-57s were Defense Systems Evaluation Squadrons (DSES), in theory replacements for tow target units, giving better training against ground and airborne defence systems, realistically simulating an ECM supported attack. Throughout the 1960s there were a number of these units based around the US and a few overseas locations. Eventually most were absorbed into two squadrons of the Aerospace Defence Command. The 4713th DSES in the northeast U.S. was stationed at Stewart AFB, NY, Otis AFB, Mass, and finally Westover AFB, Mass. Aircraft of this unit were often seen in Europe in support of USAF fighter activities. The other unit was the 4677th DSES originating at Hill AFB, Utah, and later moved to Malmstrom AFB, Montana. Its area of interest was primarily Fighter Interceptor Squadron (FIS) training for units guarding the Canadian approaches to the US. In 1974, the 4713th DSES at Westover was inactivated and the aircraft were divided between two Air National Guard units, and the 4677th DSES was redesignated the 17th DSES. Operating EB-57Es exclusively, this unit was inactivated in July 1979 and was the last to fly Canberras in the USAF. It shared the Defence Systems Evaluation mission with the Kansas and Vermont Air National Guard units, those being the 190th DSEG at Topeka, and the 158th DSEG at Burlington, both flying EB-57Bs. In 1978, the 190th phased into another aircraft and mission, and the 158th DSEG became the last U.S. military unit to fly B-57s. While operating as the last to fly the EB-57s as well, the 158th DSES supported ADC fighter squadron training and all major NORAD exercises throughout the U.S. and Canada.

On 6 April, the 190th Bomb Group became the 190th Defense Systems Evaluation Group. Clearly this was not a mission for the B-57s, with their three tons of special bombardment equipment. It also required ECM equipment not present on "stock" B-57s. What was used was yet another variation on the Canberra theme the EB-57B, earlier production models with ECM gear installed in place of bomb load. This new mission, then, might well have been the return of some of the B models the squadron had in 1958. Certainly, after the G models, it was a relief to fly something with the weight a bit better distributed, and the whole load reduced to something like the original burden. At any rate, off to Davis-Monthan went the G models, and the EB-57B's began to come in from Westover AFB, Mass. and Malstrom AFB, Montana.

Under the general heading of "defense systems evaluation," there were a number of distinct types of missions conducted by the men and machines of the 190th. Five were fairly common. One was COLLEGE DROPOUT, a test of Nite-Hawks radar and computers. Another was SAGA, which was a test of a Fighter-Interceptor Squadron. VIGILANT OVERVIEW was a multi-region test of Air Defense Command, and MUTE was an evaluation of a single Air Defense Region. The BRAVE SERIES exercises were non-evaluation practice exercises.

On the 29th of November 1975, the 190th met with the third major accident in its eighteen years. A B-57C, containing Lieutenant Gary Keller and Captain Wiley Nolan, flew from Forbes ANGB to Sawyer AFB, Mich., where they picked up an EB-57B that had been snowbound and left there earlier. On their return flight, bad weather caught up with them. Forbes was inaccessible. A stopover and refueling at Offutt AFB would be necessary. In the meantime, the radio on Keller's B-57C malfunctioned, so all communications had to be through Captain

Nolan's set. Besides, the weather at Offutt was tolerable only in comparison with that of Forbes. There was a 5,000-foot overcast, and broken clouds at 700 feet, a general four-mile visibility, and fog. Evidently, the two aircrafts collided four miles northwest of Offutt. They must have only brushed one another, for both pilots were able to eject safely, though Lt Keller suffered a broken leg. Both aircrafts crashed and burned.

The first quarter of 1976 proved to be a busy time for the aircraft and personnel of the 117 DSES. Three and many times 4 BB-57s were deployed weekly to all parts; of the United States. In January they went to Alaska and Canada and also deployed 4 aircraft to Shaw AFB SC. There they participated in 'the 20th NORAD Regional Evaluation, A support package consisting of maintenance and supply personnel accompanied this deployment. The 190th made all take off times and flew the required missions with no aborts. In February Canberras flew to Homestead AFB, Florida. Their primary mission was providing ECM training for the NIKE Hercules and NIKE Hawk sites in the Miami and Key West Florida area. Four sorties were flown daily, again, with no aborts. The same month the 117 was deployed to Nellis AFB, NV to participate in "Bold Eagle '76!" They were selected for participation in this Joint Chiefs of Staff exercise by the 12th Air Force. Personnel totaling 22,000 from the Army, Navy, and Air Force (including Guard and Reserve Forces) participated. The mission of the 117 was to conduct electronic warfare operations to protect the fighter aircraft in the tactical strike force. Col Robert Reed, USAF Senior Air Force Controller commented, "their contribution to this endeavor was noteworthy." Colonel Reed praised the 117 for their "professional attitude, enthusiasm, and productivity."

On April 5th, 1977. At 10:00 that morning, a flight of two EB-57s left Forbes Field to practice formation flying. After reaching Richards-Gebaur AFB, Mo, they turned back toward Forbes and split up, intending to complete separately any remaining training requirements. One, with Major Kenneth Simpson and Captain Butler, continued on normally. The other, with 1stLt Carl D. Camp III and 2ndLt Ross C. Keller, disappeared from the Kansas City radar screens at 11:03. The remains of the aircraft were found about 30 miles from Forbes Field, in a crater about 10 feet deep and ten feet in diameter. The cockpit canopy was about 125 feet away, and the body of one of the crewmen was outside the main area of wreckage, suggesting a belated attempt to bail out. Most mysterious of all, there was no radio communication from the doomed aircraft. Standard operating procedure, in event of an in-flight emergency, would have been to radio Forbes Field explaining the emergency and then, if necessary, to eject. No word was ever received.

On 22 August 1977, Major General Edward Fry announced that the 190th Defense Systems Evaluation Group was to become the 190th Air Refueling Group, converting from EB-57s to KC-135s. The official date of conversion was to be 1 Apr 1978. The announcement could scarcely be called a surprise: There had been rumors circulating – and fairly accurate ones at that for almost a year. Now, though, retraining, reorganization and re-equipment could begin.

Conversion to Aerial refueling meant a change in gaining command from Air Defense Command. It meant the phasing out of Electronic Warfare Officers and the ECM shop, and the training of in-flight refueling operators. It also meant increases in the size of the engine shop

and the security police department. All told, it meant the raising of the unit strength of 850. Col Mahler frankly regarded recruiting 200 additional Air Guardsmen as the most difficult task in conversion.

If it was so, it wasn't by default. Conversion to the Stratotankers meant the retraining of all pilots and EWO's and virtually the whole of the maintenance squadron. It also meant practically a new inventory for the base supply.

From the 12th to the 19th of April, the 190th flew its last mission as a Defense Systems Evaluation Group. Like many before, it was an Air Defense exercise for the Alaskan Air Command. From the 12th to the 18th of April, the Canberras of the 190th tested the alertness of the Alaskan Air Command for the last time. On the same day that the exercise ended, that last Canberra left Forbes Field, bound for testing, for museums, and for the remaining DSE units. It was 20 years to the day from the arrival of the first B-57 at Hutchinson.

Four days later – 22 April 1978 – the first KC-135 arrived at Forbes (for training purposes, not one of those assigned to the unit.) The history of the 190th Defense Systems Evaluation Group had come to an end. The history of the 190th Air Refueling Group was about to begin.

The unit's new name became official on 8 July 1978, with Special Order G-6 (AIR). Now the 190th belonged to the Strategic Air Command (SAC).

By the end of September the 190th had received a total of eight KC-135s and its compliment was filled.

It's been said that there are only two kinds of aircraft: fighters and targets. While that is an exaggeration, there is some truth to the statement and even more so when referencing military aircraft. When it comes to aerial combat the 190th's KC-135R Stratotanker, with no weapons and no defenses, could only qualify as a big fat aerial target. the Stratotanker's time as a defenseless utility aircraft may be coming to an end. In March, a 190th tanker took a Large Aircraft Infrared Counter Measure (LAIRCM) package along for operational evaluation to Afghanistan. The primary mission for the tanker and its Kansas Air Guard crew was the evacuation of wounded personnel from the Afghan theater to Ramstein, Germany. Aero medical

evacuation is a mission the 190th has performed numerous times in the past, but this time the KC-135 had more protection than just the cover of darkness and an irregular approach to the Bagram Airfield. Mounted to the belly of the plane was the LAIRCM pod, designed to detect and defeat incoming infrared anti-aircraft missiles. The last 30 years has seen a large proliferation of small, man-portable, self-contained infrared anti-aircraft missiles throughout the world. These weapons are typically shoulder fired with a range of about three miles. There are tens of thousands of these weapons unaccounted for and they are small enough to fit into a car, which means there could be sophisticated anti-aircraft missiles virtually anywhere in the world at anytime. The Northrop Grumman LAIRCM system, known as "The Guardian," is pod-based and designed to detect and employ countermeasures against infrared-guided surface-to-air

missiles. When the system detects a launch, it provides 360-degree protection by tracking the incoming missile and then jamming the missile's guidance system with a laser beam. The entire process occurs in seconds and requires no action by the tanker's crew. "It's this sort of cooperative effort between the military and the private sector that drive advances in military technology," said Maj. Gen. (KS) Lee Tafanelli, the adjutant general. "This new system will provide a strong measure of protection for U.S. airmen as they carry out their vital missions at home and abroad." The Guardian System is contained almost entirely in a single pod that mounts to the underside of the tanker's fuselage. The system can be removed and mounted on another aircraft in a matter of minutes, providing flexibility and cost savings as it can be removed from aircraft not in harm's way. This is in stark contrast to typical defensive systems where all the system's components are permanently installed throughout the aircraft. The system provides the crew and passengers another layer of safety, says Master Sgt. Shad England, 190th avionics, who flew into Afghanistan with the LAIRCM. "The Guardian system gave everyone involved in the aero medical mission a new sense of security when travelling on a KC-135 into a potentially hostile environment," said England. Initial indications are that the Guardian system performed well. The Coyote crew made four flights into Afghanistan, bringing more than 60 wounded warriors to Germany. After each flight, the Guardian system required less time and attention with its maintenance, ultimately becoming brief and routine. "Anti-missile technology is long overdue on the KC-135," said Col. Keith Lang, commander of the 190th Air Refueling Wing. "The Stratotanker has flown in harm's way since Vietnam and the time is right to add this extremely important defensive capability." The Air Force has not decided if the Guardian system will be standard equipment on Stratotankers. , the work of the 190th towards the Guardian's development and testing will form much of the basis on which the Air Force will decide the defensive system's future. The innovation and leadership of the 190th is nothing new for Lt. Col. Jay Selanders, who served as the aircraft commander on the recently completed mission. "The 190th has a history of leading the way in KC-135 innovation," said Selander. We have played a significant role in the development of this system, including this opportunity for its first operational deployment and testing. I personally hope that we stay involved with the system as it continues to develop."

When a KC-135E flies into Forbes Field, friends and family members aren't squinting to read the tail numbers on the planes.

They are looking for a pig or a lizard or a Tasmanian devil painted on the nose of the plane to tell them which members of the 190th Air Refueling Group are coming home.

Nose art, or decorative pictures painted on the noses of planes, has made a comeback since World War II, when fanciful paintings of mascots or scantily clad and unclad beauties accompanied many a plane into battle.

Six of the 10 KC-135 tankers assigned to the 190th have artwork on their noses, and most have an accompanying story, said Master Sgt. Bob Wylie.

With two exceptions, all of the artwork has been painted by Staff Sgt. Michael Chandler. It usually takes him two days to paint the designs, sometimes as long as seven hours at a time, he said.

Nose art is the plane's signature, he said. By looking at the nose art, a person can tell what base the plane is from, who the crew chief is, and perhaps a little bit about the plane's history, he said.

Few remember the tail number of the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on Aug 6, 1945, Chandler said. It is simply the Enola Gay.

Wylie's plane, the 58-0005, is known as 01' Lightnen, and carries a picture of a porker struck in the tail by lightning, with a bolt flying out of its mouth.

In August, 1989, the plane was actually struck by lightning while sitting on the ramp at Forbes, he said.

The artwork boosts morale by personalizing the planes for the men and women who work on them, he said. Because the crew chiefs are in charge of the planes, they get to pick the nickname for the plane and create the design.

SMSgt Dan Mollows plane 56-3631 carries a picture of green lizard running across a cloud with the legend Lep N Lizard. The plane got its name when one of the crew members got a look at the plane as it returned with a new grayish green camouflage paint job and said it looks like a leapin lizard to me.

The 57-1460 known as TAZZ depicts a Tazmanian Devil with a screw driver in one hand and a hammer in the other standing in front of bright orange background. The nickname and the drawing are a tribute to crew chief Sgt. William Hirbour, who had a volatile temper and a tendency to throw tools when he was younger, Wylie said. Tech. Sgt. Rodney Miller, Hirbour's assistant, did the artwork, Wylie said.

Tech. Sgt. Lester Wilhite is crew chief of the 59-1516, nicknamed after the last two tail numbers, Sweet Sixteen. It has a reclining woman with Blonde hair, wearing a tight-fitting leotard.

Master Sgt. Don Zellers is crew chief of the 56-3641, which sums up the 190th's mission with a flying cartoon coyote with roller skates strapped to his feet and engines strapped to his back. Its phonetically spelled nickname is the Ki-ote-es Gas-e-as, and was painted by the assistant crew chief, Tech. Sgt. Earl Flowers.

Master Sgt. Jake Elliot and his assistant, Tech. Sgt. Mike Coffin, are in charge of the 56-3658, known as Iron Eagle, alias Dragon Tail. This plane got its name for the time someone forgot to lock up the refueling boom before a landing exercise, Wylie said. It carries a picture of a landing eagle striking up sparks with his tail feathers, he said.

Several of the planes also have bright green camels painted on the sides, representing each sortie flown in Saudi Arabia. The Lep-n-Lizard has 31 camels with one upside down to represent a mission the plane missed because of mechanical problems. Wylie said a package of Camel cigarettes provided the impromptu stencil for many of the camels.

After the logo is designed, it must be approved by the line chief, the squadron commander, and finally, by Col. Mick Baier, commander of the 190th, Wylie said. The designs can be no longer than 3 feet by 4 feet, and must be painted with non-gloss paint so as not to tip off enemy radar.

The new year brought a major test of the Group's capabilities in the form of REFORGER XI. The unit was called upon to support the transportation of Army troops from Ft. Riley, Kan. to Europe. To meet this challenge, an extra 130 people were needed to keep the airfield in constant operation from 13-19 January. Aiding in the transportation of 7,000 soldiers, some in the unit worked 14-hour days in rain and snow with the chill factor reaching 41 degrees below zero on the ramp. Ten days after REFORGER, the Group was honored with the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award for 15 Apr 1977-14 Apr 1978, "the final fruit of the 190th service with ADCOM, and of our long years with the B-57." The award was presented in an official ceremony in May.

Conversion to the 190th AREFG meant assuming strategic alert as part of SAC's deterrent. Such alerts have meant readiness in SAC since 1957. Each of the 13 Air Refueling Group ANG bases are linked directly with SAC headquarters at Offutt AFB, Neb. On alert duty, Guard aircraft and crews and ground support specialists were thoroughly briefed on their SAC plan. Practice exercises became somewhat frequent and were known only by the Group Commander and SAC in Omaha.

Aug 1990: Volunteers began flying missions in support of Operation Desert Shield.

20 Dec 1990: Called to active duty as part of Operation Desert Shield call-up.

15 Apr 1991: Released from active duty after taking part in Desert Shield/Desert Storm.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in the summer of 1990, the 190th Air Refueling Group, Forbes Field, Topeka, was among the first of the National Guard units to arrive in the Middle East as a part of the Desert Shield buildup.

It began rotations into Saudi Arabia in August as part of the 75,000-man buildup. The unit was commanded by Col Charles M. "Mick" Baier, and operated from a base at Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Its mission was to coordinate air refueling operations for the buildup, commanding active Air Force, Air Force Reserve, and Air National Guard units.

Tanker crews returned to Forbes Field following a deployment, to be replaced by another crew. By the end of January, 1991, ten KC-135E tankers from the 190th were supporting the air

bombardment designed to soften up the Iraqi defenses for the ultimate push into Kuwait. COL Baier became commander of the 1791st Air Refueling Wing (Provisional), and then the 1709th Air Refueling Wing. The 1709th became a part of the 1701st, which also included bombers.

The 190th KC-135E's flew over 2000 sorties, maintaining a mission capable rate of 87 percent. It flew 90 percent of the refueling missions in the theater.

During one of the missions, a KC-135E tanker, flown by Maj Kevin J. Sweeney, had two engines on the left wing ripped from the aircraft. This caused a loss of hydraulics, which affected fuel pumps, landing gears, and other aircraft operations. With help from his crew, he got the plane under control, dumped the fuel load, and managed to land the aircraft, blowing four tires on touchdown.

The unit's effort continued when Desert Storm, the ground attack against the Iraqi Army into Kuwait, began at the end of February. Lasting only 100 hours, the attack pushed the Iraqi's back into Iraq, freed Kuwait, and destroyed much of the Iraqi Army.

As soon as the war was over, plans were made for the return of the unit to Topeka, which occurred on a beautiful March day, March 14, 1991. Flying their 10-tanker formation over the Kansas capitol before landing at Forbes Field, the arrival at Forbes Field was witnessed by thousands of family, friends, and community members. It had been the most one-sided battle in the history of the U. S. military.

15 Mar 1992: Unit abbreviation changed to 117 ARS

A portion of the 190th Air Refueling Wing deployed to Incirlik Air Base, Turkey, on July 9, 1999, in support of Operation Northern Watch, which was designed to enforce the "no fly" zone over northern Iraq. Several crews were rotated into this mission over the next several months.

In 2000, over 250 members of the 190th participated in Operation Deliberate Forge, a round-the-clock refueling mission over Bosnia-Herzegovina. Part of their mission involved refueling of F-18's from the USS George Washington.

The unit again deployed in mid-March, 2003, in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. More than 100 members and the unit were involved in supporting air refueling operations in and around southwest Asia, in support of ground combat in Iraq. The unit's personnel and aircraft returned to Forbes Field on Apr. 27, 2003.

Over 200 members and seven KC-135 tankers of the 190th Air Refueling Wing, Kansas Air National Guard, deployed to Incirlik Air Base, Turkey, in support of Operation Enduring Freedom during the months of January, February, and March 2004. While deployed, the 190th transferred more than 2 million pounds of fuel to a variety of aircraft flying in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan. They were replaced by the Alaska Air National Guard in March of 2004.

Over 200 members and their tankers from the 190th Air Refueling Wing deployed to Andersen Air Force Base, Guam on Oct. 1, 2005 to support Pacific Air Forces Tanker Task Force. The mission also included a short-notice search and rescue mission more than 700 miles west of Guam, when a Japanese fisherman had been reported overboard.

In June, 2006, the 190th Air Refueling Wing sent two KC-135 tankers and crews to Egypt, to assist Egyptian pilots with refueling procedures. Because the Egyptian Air Force had no tankers of its own, it was essential that the pilots have experience with air refueling. Operating out of Cairo International Airport, the 190th tankers safely managed 352 receivers on 26 sorties, with approximately 1,100 contacts.

With the ferocity of Kansas weather, it's not uncommon for a mission to be impacted by thunderstorms, wind or even the occasional blizzard. It's not often that a 190th Air Refueling Wing mission is affected by a tsunami, but that's exactly what happened following the massive earthquake and resulting tsunami that recently struck Japan. Within minutes of the earthquake, officials issued tsunami warnings for Japan and dozens of other islands throughout the Pacific, including Wake Island and Hawaii, both of which were the temporary home of three 190th KC-135s and their crews. The two tankers and crews at Wake Island were part of a six ship mission escorting 12 Marine F-18s from Japan to the United States. The Coyotes took off from Yakota Air Force Base just hours before the devastating earthquake struck. They were unaware of the earthquake or the resulting tsunami, until they landed at Wake Island. It was actually several hours after their arrival that they learned they were in a tsunami warning. And once they learned of the approaching tsunami, they had less than three hours until the anticipated wave would strike. Unlike many islands, Wake is extremely small and completely void of any elevated features. "The tallest features on the island are the two-story billeting buildings," said Maj. Dan Skoda, one of the 190th pilots on the mission. There are also only about 100 year-round personnel that are stationed at Wake and they immediately implemented the island's disaster plan. "They assured us that the geography of the reef around the island made the risk of a devastating swell very low," said Skoda. "We had to trust they knew what they were doing. We certainly had enough time and space on the tankers to evacuate all the personnel off the island."

When the wave did finally strike, the island was spared the disaster that struck Japan. Wake experienced just a two foot swell that caused no damage and the Coyotes were able to complete their mission on schedule. The crews rode out the wave on the roof of their billeting building. The story was somewhat similar for the 190th crew that was in Hawaii at the time of the tsunami as part of a mission to move two F-15s to a Pacific country. When Maj. Ryan Strong first learned of the tsunami warning, his first course of action was to gain accountability of his crew and restrict them to their high rise hotel in Waikiki. After discussing a possible unscheduled launch of the aircraft to avoid the tsunami, it was decided that the crews would ride out the wave from their hotel. Being in an unfamiliar situation, the crews found it difficult to sleep with the approaching wave due to strike at 4 a.m. local time. "Every hour there were public safety messages playing over the hotel intercom instructing us to stay in our rooms above the second floor," said Strong. "The streets were empty except for the occasional police vehicle." Although Hawaii did experience some localized flooding and minor damage from the

wave, it was uneventful at Waikiki beach. The biggest impact to the crew was later that morning said Strong.

“We had a 7 a.m. crew show that morning, but there were no taxis or crew transportation due to gas stations being sold out,” said Strong. The Coyotes were eventually able to secure transportation and the rest of their mission was uneventful. Although the tsunami ended up having no negative impacts on the missions, it was still a unique situation that reinforces the professionalism and flexibility aircrews must maintain even on routine missions. Neither pilot said they ever felt like they were in danger Skoda said, “There was definitely some apprehension on the part of the crew members as we waited for the wave.” 2011

Air Force Lineage and Honors

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Sources

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