

168 AIR REFUELING SQUADRON



MISSION

LINEAGE

437 Bombardment Squadron (Medium) constituted, 19 Jun 1942

Activated, 26 Jun 1942

Redesignated 437th Bombardment Squadron (Light), 3 Feb 1945

Inactivated, 4 Jan 1946

Redesignated 168 Bombardment Squadron (Light) and allotted to ANG, 24 May 1946

Redesignated 168 Fighter-Bomber Squadron, 1954

Redesignated 168 Fighter Interceptor Squadron, 1955

Inactivated, 31 May 1958

Redesignated 168 Air Refueling Squadron, 1986

168 Air Refueling Squadron extended federal recognition 1 Oct 1986

STATIONS

Barksdale Field, LA, 26 Jun 1942

Harding Field, LA, 8-27 Aug 1942

Shipdham, England, 12 Sep 1942

Horsham St Faith, England, 4-22 Oct 1942

St-Leu, Algeria, c. 10 Nov 1942

Tafaraoui, Algeria, 17 Nov 1942

Maison Blanche, Algeria, 26 Nov 1942

Telergma, Algeria, 13 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, 20 Sep 1944-8 Jan 1945
Bradley Field, CT, 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
Chicago, IL, 1946
Eielson AFB, AK, 1986

ASSIGNMENTS

319 Bombardment Group, 26 Jun 1942
VII Bomber Command, 18 Dec 1945-4 Jan 1946
176 COMPG, 1 Oct 1986

WEAPON SYSTEMS

Mission Aircraft

B-26, 1942
B-25, 1944
A-26, 1945
B-26, 1946
P-51, 1954
F-84, 1955
F-86, 1957
KC-135

Support Aircraft

COMMANDERS

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

Air Force Outstanding Unit Award
Jan 1994, Jan 1996, and Jan 2004

EMBLEM



The original insignia of the 168 Bombardment Squadron and later the 168 Fighter Interceptor Squadron, depicted a skunk wearing a red baseball cap and red and white apron. The skunk stood on a cloud and served a bomb on a tray. Old-timers at O'Hare, the stomping ground of the 168 FIS, believe the skunk to be a Disney character, probably "Flower" from the film Bambi. Whatever his origin, the skunk became known as "Sweet Willie" in honor of the first Air Guard Commander, LTC William Chum. In fact, the 168 FIS kept a live skunk as a mascot. According to Air Force Historian Mrs. Endicott, the 437th Bomb Squadron, predecessor to the 168 Bomb Squadron, registered no official insignia. The skunk has its roots in Chicago, where it was originated, and represents "defiance". The word "Chicago" is Indian for "strong onion odor". The skunk's baseball cap is a replica of those worn by the aircrew of the squadron. When the 168

ARS inherited the honors and insignia of its past illustrious units, the insignia was changed slightly to correspond with the new mission of the unit, namely refueling instead of bombardment. Instead of the skunk serving a bomb, the skunk now holds a fuel nozzle, representing the mission of aerial refueling.

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

The 168 Air Refueling Squadron is the only Arctic region refueling unit for all of PACAF, and maintains a substantial number of personnel on active duty and civilian technician status in order to meet its daily operational requirements. The Wing's Primary Assigned Aircraft are eight KC-135 R-models; there is also one Backup Aircraft Inventory. The 168 Air Refueling Squadron completed its R-model conversion in 1995, and in 2000 they completed a major flight deck upgrade called "Pacer CRAG" – with the CRAG standing for Compass, Radar, and Guidance Positioning System.

The mission of the 168 Air Refueling Squadron is to train and equip KC-135R combat crews to provide air refueling in support of PACAF Operations Plans. The peacetime mission provides air refueling training and exercise support for all 11th Air Force AWACS and fighter aircraft as well as alert tankers and crews to support Alaska NORAD Region plans and KC-135X/S refueling requirements. Besides a federally directed mission requirement, as a unit of the Alaska National Guard, the 168 Air Refueling Squadron is an asset of the Governor of Alaska. As such, the Governor can direct the unit to respond to emergencies declared or missions required within the State.

Constituted and activated at Barksdale Field, LA, in June 1942, the 437th BS (Medium) was assigned to the 319th BG, Twelfth Air Force, with which it flew combat operations with Martin B-26s and North American B-25s in the MTO between November 1942 and December 1944.

In January 1944 the units moved to new bases of operation in Italy and continued to demonstrate superior achievement in precision bombing during the critical periods of the Italian Campaign.

During their tour of duty in North Africa, Sardinia, Corsica and Italy, both squadrons were equipped with B-26, until November 44 when they received their B-25s.

Returned to CONUS and re-equipped with Douglas A-26B/Cs, the 437th BS and other squadrons of the 319th BG were reassigned to the Seventh Air Force in April 1945, and flew combat operations from Okinawa during the last month of World War II. Inactivated at Ft Lawton, WA, in January 1946, the squadron was redesignated 168 BS and was allotted to the Illinois NG on 24 May 1946.

1 Apr 1951: Called to active duty as part of the Korean War call-up, the 168 BS remained in Chicago for three months and then moved to Langley AFB, VA, for additional training.

126th Bomb Wing, Light, B-26Bs & Cs, 21 Nov 1951 - 24 May 1952 Sixteen aircraft per squadron. These Invaders were flown from Langley AFB, VA to Bordeaux AB, France by 126th BWg pilots; aircraft flown to Laon AB, France on 17-24 May 1952

B-26 43-22722 - Destroyed, nose gear collapsed, landing in rain. Torn in half by recovery crew at Capodichino Airport, Naples, Italy, 7 Nov 1952, no fatalities.

B-26 44-35652 - Crashed, hit mountain in rain, 1nm NW of Cava de Tirreni, Italy 7 Nov 1952, 2 fatalities.

1 Jan 1953: Returned to state control at O'Hare Field, Chicago, to be reorganized as the 168 FBS and equipped with North American F-51Ds (from mid-May 1954).

In 1954 it was redesignated the 168 Fighter-Bomber Squadron, and flew the F-51 In 1955 it received the F-84 becoming the 168 Fighter-Interceptor Squadron.

In 1957 it flew the F-86L In May of 1958, the 168's aircraft and personnel were assigned to other units, but the 168's unit designation remained on the state's rolls -- a "technical deactivation". Almost thirty years later, the unit was reactivated as the 168 Air Refueling Squadron and assigned to the Alaska Air National Guard.

31 May 1958: Inactivated due to funding restrictions.

The 168 Squadron designation was retained by the Illinois ANG until 1986, when it was transferred to the Alaska ANG.

The 168 Air Refueling Squadron started life in 1986 as the 176th Tactical Airlift Group's Eielson-based Detachment 1. Its mission was to build a tanker unit from the ground up. In the Spring of 1986, members of the unit — what few there were — began a 17-day tour of other Air National Guard tanker units. This trip had a dual purpose, one of its participants would recount later: "One, conduct interviews and make selection for the jobs ... and two, steal people." Evidently they were very persuasive, because the new unit was staffed by 16 officers and 65 enlisted personnel by September, when its first planes, four renovated KC-135 arrived.

On 12 Sep 1986 KC-135E 571494 from 168 ARW lands at Kulis ANGB before going to Eielson AFB for final stop. Initially the Squadron was assigned 4 KC-135E.

Obtained from the Arkansas Air National Guard over vociferous objections from local politicians, the KC-135s were hand-me-downs, and the 168's other facilities were antiquated. Despite this, the unit still managed to supply 70 percent of the theater's air refueling training needs in its first

six months of operation.

The early days of the 168, like those of its Anchorage parent, were not without tragedy. On 25 Sep 1989, one of the unit's KC-135 exploded on the flightline, killing MSgt. Cheryl Helgerman and MSgt. Bill Malico injuring 2 others.

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

The number of assigned tankers has been doubled and now includes four KC-135Es and four KC-135Ds. Only four air-refuelable KC-135 tankers were built. 63-8060 'Wil Thing' serves with the 168

168 Air Refueling Wing supported NATO Operation Unified Protector during the Libyan civil war, offloading an average of 332,000 pounds of fuel per day to coalition forces. 2011

168 Air Refueling Group underwent two activation ceremonies since its beginning in 1985. The first was the activation of renaming Det 1, 176 TAG to the 168 Air Refueling Squadron (AREFSq) in October 1986.

1990, the 168 Air Refueling Squadron was activated as the 168 Air Refueling Group. Maj Gen Killey accompanied by key staff members from the Air National Guard made the announcement and presented MSgt Mike Sloan with an Outstanding Recruiting Award.

The first KC-135 airplane for the new Air National Guard unit here touched down on the flightline Friday afternoon to cheers and applause from Guard unit members, who gathered on the taxiway and held a sign that read "Welcome Chena I." The plane made a preliminary pass over the flightline with its 47-foot boom lowered for display. The boom is used to refuel other air-craft mid-flight, the primary function of the KC-135.

The new Guard unit has been slowly establishing itself in its Eielson headquarters over the summer, and has so far hired 70 full-time employees, about 70 percent Alaskans, Clinton said. Most came

KC-135 for Eielson's new Air National Guard unit arrived from other Air National Guard units or transferred from the Air Force.

Capt. Jim Alonzo, the unit's resource manager, said he is looking for one or two local people to train as a pilot or navigator. Interested applicants can be men or women, must be less than 26 years old, have a college education and be able to pass an aptitude test and a rigorous physical examination, he said. We made front page news for the local paper and even managed to pitch recruiting.

In August of 1985, Lt Col Doug Clinton was selected to be the project manager of Det 1, 176 TAG.

The job was "simple", build a tanker unit at Eielson AFB. What's a tanker? In no time, he had help who were asking the same questions. Capt Jim Alonzo, SSgt Kathy Trout, TSgt Wayne Henderson rounded out the original group.

The unit continued to grow from the original group of four. Maj Bill Foulois was hired as the Chief of Maintenance, and Lt Col Tom Gresch was stolen from Spokane by Col Clinton during one of the visits to our sister unit learning what tankers do. Because Tom Gresch was in the construction business it was felt that he would be right at home helping "construct" a tanker unit. On 30 September 1986, personnel specialist, Mike Wargo reported that there were 16 officers and 65 enlisted assigned. Support and Resources were combined at that time as we received most of the support in these areas from Kulis.

We began recruiting and hiring with a seventeen day trip in March 86 to the other ANG tanker units. This trip had a dual purpose. (1) Conduct interviews and make selections for the jobs closed out and (2) Steal people. A maintenance team composed of Maj Foulois, MSgt Mike Watson, SMSgt Dave Engen and SMSgt Jim Costello did the interviewing.

The trip began with a direct and slow trip to Washington DC on a C-130. It was a short hop to the 171st at Pittsburg. Lt Tollett continued with his business in DC then attempted to catch an Alaska Airlines flight from Washington National to Pittsburg. He caught up with us after realizing that Alaska Air- lines did not fly from Washington DC. We continued on to Milwaukee Wisconsin to visit with the 128th, jumped down to the 134th at Knoxville, Tennessee, then the 190th at Topeka, Kansas followed by the 151st at Salt Lake City, Utah and finally the 141st at Fairchild, Washington before finally coming home dead tired.

168 Air Refueling Group (ARG) began its lineage as the 437th Bombardment Squadron (Medium) when that unit was activated at Barksdale Field, Louisiana on 26 June 1942. In September of that year, the 437th was assigned to England. The following month the unit was transferred to North Africa where it participated in the North Africa invasion of 1943. In November of that same year, the unit was reassigned to Sardinia and Corsica, assisting in the liberation of these two Mediterranean islands. During the tours of duty in North Africa, Sardinia, Corsica, and Italy, the 437th was equipped with B-26 "Martin Marauder" aircraft. In November of 1944, the unit received North American "Mitchell" bombers.

In January 1945, the 437th as part of the 319th Bombardment Group, returned to the States and prepared to move to the Pacific Theater of Operations, arriving on Okinawa in early July 1945. While in the Far East, the unit participated in the Ryukus Campaign and the Air Offensive, Japan. In November of 1945, the 437th returned to the States and was inactivated on 4 January 1946.

The 437th served with distinction throughout World War II, accumulating nine combat campaign streamers, two Presidential Unit Citations (Rome and Florence in 1944) and the French Croix de Guerre with palm (April, May and June 1944).

In May 1946, the 437th Bombardment Squadron (Light) was redesignated the 168 Bombardment Squadron (Light) and allotted to the Illinois Air National Guard. The 168 received Federal recognition in 1947 with Lt Col William J. Chum the commander of the B-26 unit. The unit was assigned to O'Hare Field, Chicago International Airport, in November 1949. The following year the unit became part of the Group later renamed the 26th Bombardment Wing (Light).

During the years between World War II and the Korean Conflict, the Air National Guard units in the Chicago area were quickly rebuilt from the abundance of Air Force veterans in the immediate area. Acquiring aircraft was not a problem at this time since the Air Force had more than adequate quantities of the relatively new B-26, "Invader" bomber, many of which had not seen combat.

In the 126th Wing's formative years after World War II, regular two hour weekly drills were held at night providing only limited time for training and administration. Much of the aircrew flying was accomplished during the weekends in a non-pay status. The 15 day summer Field Training periods were held at Camp Williams, Wisconsin, an ideal location for concentrated air to air and air to ground tactical training that aided greatly in bringing the unit up to combat proficiency.

On 1 April 1951, the 126th Bombardment Wing, including the 168 Bombardment Squadron was ordered to active duty. After the initial three months shakedown and training at their home bases, the Wing Headquarters and assigned units were transferred to Langley Air Force Base, Virginia. Later that year the Wing received orders to proceed to Merignac Air Base, Bordeaux, France via the Arctic route.

The flight across the Atlantic was plagued with adverse weather ranging from sub-zero temperatures to freezing rain and low visibility. As a result of these conditions, "on the deck" flight, just above the ocean's surface, was employed for a large part of the crossing. Since the B-26 aircraft was not equipped for cold weather operations (no cockpit heating, de-icer and anti-icing equipment) this successful operation proved to be the most significant accomplishment of the Illinois Air National Guard at that time.

While their reception in France was not warm, the task of the Americans was important. As General Eisenhower, then Supreme Commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Forces said, "Our job is to build a wall of security around the free nations of the world."

The 126th Bombardment Wing (Light) played a significant role in the strengthening of the air defenses of Western Europe. They worked under United States Air Forces Europe, in support of the ground forces under NATO.

The 168 Bombardment Squadron, as part of the 126th Wing, successfully participated in all

NATO exercises and joint maneuvers conducted in Italy, West Germany, France, England and the Low Countries (Netherlands). Toward the end of 1952, Air National Guard personnel who had not signed extended active duty statements were returned to their home bases in the United States. This was accomplished in gradual increments over a three month period. On 1 January 1953, the 126th Bombardment Wing (Light) designation was returned to the state of Illinois.

On 14 May 1953: the first of a series of state General Orders reactivating certain Illinois Air National Guard units were issued. With the assignment of a new mission, the former 126th Bombardment Wing became the 126th Fighter - Bomber Wing.

On 23 April 1954, the 168 Fighter - Bomber Squadron was reactivated and equipped with F-51 "Mustangs", and returned to O'Hare International Airport in Chicago. The unit converted to the F-84F "Thunderstreak" in July 1955. At this time the unit was redesignated the 168 Fighter Interceptor Squadron.

Extract from the Republic Aviation News Release, 20 November 1953. "While currently scheduled to serve primarily as a fighter-bomber, the versatility of the new swept wing F-84 F qualifies it for fighter - interceptor and fighter - escort work.

Clean, sleek lines of sweepback design are characteristic of the Thunderstreak. Wings and tail surfaces, raked back at an angle of 40 degrees, add to its speed and maneuverability. The flared back cockpit canopy adds to streamlining and affords the pilot maximum visibility."

On 31 May 1958, shortly after the unit converted to the F-86 L, it was again deactivated by the National Guard. The Adjutant General of Illinois made a successful bid to keep the 168 unit designation on the state's rolls.

On October 1986, the 168 Air Refueling Squadron (AREFS) was activated at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska. Lt Col William D. Clinton was chosen to command the squadron. Initially the squadron was assigned four KC-135E aircraft.

Although the facilities were antiquated and the equipment "hand me down", the 168 supplied 70 per cent of the theater air refueling training needs in the first six months of operation. The first real test of the new unit came in September 1988 when the 168 received an "EXCELLENT" on their first Unit Effectiveness Inspection (UEI).

On 25 September 1989, a tragic segment in the squadron's history occurred. After returning from a routine training mission, one of the unit's aircraft exploded on the flightline, killing two crewmembers MSgt Cheryl Helgerman and MSgt Jim Malico and injuring two others along with two passengers.

On 9 July 1990, Maj Gen Philip Killey, Director of the Air National Guard, announced that the 168 Air Refueling Squadron would become the 168 Air Refueling Group. On 23 October 1990, the Group received Federal Recognition with its subordinate squadron and eight aircraft.

From four aircraft in 1986 to ten by September 1992 with a support metro liner....the Heritage Continues.

The 168 ARG first began its support of Desert Shield in August 1990, and continued its support through the months of Desert Storm as well as the ongoing Desert Calm/Proud Return.

During the first quarter of FY91, the 168 ARG flew 292.2 hours in support of Desert Shield. Operating from Jeddah, Saudi Arabia and serving under the 1701st Air Refueling Wing Deployed, the aircrews of the 168 ARG rotated in and out of Jeddah every two weeks. Most missions flown there were combat support over Northern and North Eastern Saudi Arabia. Also, missions were flown transporting materials to and from other locations. The last volunteer crew to rotate from Jeddah returned to Eielson AFB, Alaska, on 31 December 1990.

The first tasking in the second quarter of FY91 was to transport supplies to the aircrews and support personnel in Cairo West, Egypt. Departing Eielson, the aircraft was flown to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where many boxes and gifts from loved ones were loaded. After a brief stopover in Mildenhall, England, for fuel and crew rest, the aircraft proceeded to Cairo West, Egypt. The last overseas mission assigned to the 168 ARG, just hours before the war began, ended with an inflight emergency over the North Atlantic. The aircraft returned to Bangor, Maine, where the aircraft and crew remained for two weeks awaiting aircraft parts. Because of this delay, the original mission was completed by a KC-135A crew from Castle AFB, California. A total of 52.4 hours were flown in the second quarter FY91 in support of Desert Shield/Storm.

The 168 ARG left two aircraft, 57-001494 and 57-001465, in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, to support the war effort. In March 1991, the aircraft were returned to the unit.

In April 1991, the 168 ARG sent seven volunteer aircrews and two intelligence personnel to Cairo West, Egypt, to replace other Air National Guard personnel returning to their home unit.

Most aircrews averaged three flights per week while at Cairo West, for a total of 137.8 hours flown in the third quarter FY91 in support of Desert Storm/Calm and Proud Return.

The support personnel involved with finance, mobility and personnel were forced to adapt to the ever-changing plans and taskings received from National Guard Bureau. The system was not as flexible as it needed to be; however, the personnel of the 168 ARG took the time to make sure every member received the proper attention. Life Support personnel supplied each member with the proper gear needed for the conditions which might have been encountered. Financial information was given to each member and spouse by the Finance Office personnel. The Personnel Office made sure each member's personnel records were kept up to date. Back at Eielson, if problems were encountered by a spouse, any time during the members' absence, a representative of the 168 ARG Support Group would contact the military liaison in the Group to help correct the problem.

The 1980's were years of rapid growth and expanded missions. On October 25, 1986, the 168 Air Refueling Squadron was activated at Eielson Air Force Base near Fairbanks. The start up of a brand new unit put a heavy work load on the Air Guard personnel at Kulis but the mission was accomplished. Today, the Air Guard in Alaska is very much in the refueling business with a fine facility at Eielson and an ever increasing mission.

The 168 Air Refueling Squadron can trace its lineage to the 437th Bombardment Squadron I which was activated in June of 1942. The unit flew the B-26 medium bomber during World War Two and served with distinction in North Africa, Sicily, Sardinia, Okinawa, Germany, France and took part in the famous raids that knocked Italy out of the war. It was one of the very few B-26 units that fought against the Axis Powers in Europe and against Japan in the Pacific War. At the end of the war, the unit had accumulated nine combat awards, two Presidential Unit Citations, two Outstanding Unit Awards and the French Croix-de-Guerre with Palm.

Today, the 168 is an outstanding unit of the Air National Guard. It has grown in size and stature and achieved Group status in October of 1990. As the 168 takes on more of the refueling , missions of the tanker task force it reaches out to many parts of the world and becomes more important by the day. The 168 KC135 tankers took part in Desert Shield Desert Storm and are on call to go wherever the Air Force needs refueling capability. Like the rest of the Alaska Air Guard, the 168 success can be summed up in two words - dedicated people.



Fresno California 26 July 1957. Pilots participating in the annual Earl T. Ricks Memorial Trophy event draw positions for their starting places from the hat of Maj General W. P. Wilson Chief Of The Air Division On The National Guard Bureau. Holding the hat and supervises the selection is Fresno's " Miss Air Power" Miss Judy Angelo, posing on the wing of one of the F-84F jet fighters participating in the annual cross country flight. Looking on and assisting in the ceremonies is Miss Junior Jet" the Miss Cindy Lawler also of Fresno. The twelve pilots are representative of the air

guard pilots across the nation who compete for the Ricks Trophy. This annual event is in honor of the late Maj General Earl T. Ricks first chief of the air force division of the National Guard Bureau and serves each year to focus attention on the high degree of pilot skill each pilot must maintain to meet their mobilization requirements set up by the National Guard Bureau. The flight will terminate at Andrews Air Force Base near Washington DC where it will officially open the Air Force Associations national convention. Each of the twelve pilots will compete against each other for the best time in the event and the winner will be presented the trophy at the reserve forces award dinner to be held on 30 July at the Shoreham Hotel in Washington following reserve forces day.

USAF Unit Histories

Created: 12 Oct 2010

Updated: 9 Apr 2021

Sources

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

The Institute of Heraldry. U.S. Army. Fort Belvoir, VA.

Air Force News. Air Force Public Affairs Agency.

Unit yearbook. *Alaska Air National Guard, The 40th Anniversary, 40 Years and Still Going Strong, 1952-1992.*