

261st INFORMATION OPERATIONS SQUADRON

LINEAGE

STATIONS

ASSIGNMENTS

COMMANDERS

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

EMBLEM SIGNIFICANCE

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

The Air Guard leads among reserve forces in developing offensive cyber capabilities. It operates two 100-person squadrons that are capable of launching cyber attacks. They're Maryland's 175th Network Warfare Squadron and Delaware's 166th Network Warfare Squadron. Both squadrons support the National Security Agency, but Guard officials in Delaware and Maryland declined to discuss what the units do. As cyber operations and units expand, the active-component services are struggling to attract and retain qualified cyber troops. But that's proving to be less of a problem for the Guard. In an address at a CyberFutures Conference in March, Gen. William Shelton, the chief of the Air Force Space Command, called the shortage of cyber recruits for the Air Force "a serious national security issue." Shelton said far too few U.S. college graduates now are earning technical degrees. Of those who do, too many are foreign nationals who are ineligible to work in U.S. national security. And too many others "aren't the kind of folks that would necessarily take well to military life," he said. Pay is another problem. "There's no way that the military can compete with civilian salaries" for cyber professionals, said Wyatt, the Air Guard director. But pay disparity creates opportunities for the Guard. By joining the Guard,

cyberwarriors can keep their high-paying civilian jobs and still serve in the military. That formula seems to be working. The authorized personnel end-strength of Rhode Island's 102nd is 50 airmen, but "we're currently stacked at 58," said Marshall, the operations officer. In Washington state, where the 143rd Information Operations Squadron is being created from a combat communications squadron, "we're demographically blessed," says Dravis, the wing commander. The 143rd's headquarters sits about two miles east of Interstate 5, which runs from Canada to Mexico along the West Coast. In western Washington, the I-5 corridor is dotted with high-tech industries—Microsoft, Cisco, Boeing, T-Mobile, supercomputer-maker Cray and dozens of software companies. "We pull extensively from them," Dravis says. "We have significant experience levels walking into our units." The Los Angeles area is another "hotbed of cybertech," says Col. Stephen Beck, commander of the California Air Guard's 162nd Combat Communications Group. The group's new 261st Information Operations Squadron is based in Van Nuys, just north of L.A. In addition to numerous high-tech companies, many with ties to the military, the area has "tons of universities and two dozen cyber-research centers, all within an hour or two drive," Beck says. Similar demographics exist for the 175th in Maryland. As it expands, it expects to draw from high-tech companies clustered around Washington, D. C., and Baltimore. The locations are no coincidence. The three units were selected for cyber missions because of their proximity to cyber-savvy populations, Wyatt said. But proximity isn't always essential. "We've got a cyberwarrior in Washington state," Wyatt said, "who, on drill weekends, on his own dime, flies to the east coast to Fort Meade to do battle with folks worldwide."

Air Force Order of Battle

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