

161st AIR REFUELING WING



LINEAGE

161st Fighter Interceptor Group received federal recognition, 2 Oct 1957
Redesignated 161st Air Transport Group, 1 October 1962
Redesignated 161st Aeromedical Airlift Group, 16 Aug 1968
Redesignated 161st Military Airlift Group, 16 Dec 1968
Redesignated 161st Air Refueling Group
Redesignated 161st Air Refueling Wing, 1 Oct 1995

STATIONS

Phoenix, AZ

ASSIGNMENTS

WEAPON SYSTEMS

Mission Aircraft

F-86A 1957-1958
F-86L, 1958-1960
F-104A 1960-1962
C-97G, 1962-1972
KC-97L, 1972-1977
KC-135A, 1977
KC-135E

Support Aircraft

C-47, 1957-1962
T-33, 1953-1962

COMMANDERS

LTC Roy Jacobson
Colonel Steven M. Balsler, 2009

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

On 2 Oct 1957, the Phoenix Air National Guard's status was changed. A federal inspection was held and federal recognition was granted to the 161st Fighter Group. The 197th was to continue as before with the addition of new personnel in the 161st CAM Squadron, the 161st Air Base Squadron and the 161st USAF Dispensary.

This era saw the last of the summer deployments. In 1958 and 1959, the 161st journeyed to Casper, WY for summer training. After that, training sessions were held at Sky Harbor on a year-round basis.

With the new equipment and aircraft, increased manning was necessary. Recruiting went well and most vacancies were filled by prior service personnel eager to participate in the exciting fighter mission. New buildings were also necessary, and expansion was authorized for the Sky Harbor facility. New buildings for the 161st included an aircraft engine overhaul shop, rocket storage building and an Operations and Training building, which included a dining hall and kitchen in one wing and medical facilities in another. A club building and swimming pool were also built from funds derived from raffles, donations and club memberships.

The Phoenix Air Guard was once again called into active service in November 1961 as the construction of the Berlin Wall pushed the world to the brink of war. Within a month after mobilization, 750 personnel and 22 F-104 were in place in Germany as the unit took up flying daily patrol at the edge of the Iron Curtain.

With world tension easing, the Phoenix Air Guard returned home in August 1962. Military requirements resulted in an immediate change in mission the first time the massive bomber command integrated part-time units into its forces and mission. SAC also announced that Air Guard refueling units would begin to integrate a new craft into their inventories: the KC-135.

On 15 Aug 1962, as the unit was being officially released from extended active duty, MG Winston P. Wilson, Chief of the National Guard Bureau, told those gathered that the 161st

Fighter Group would soon be redesignated the 161st Air Transport Group. He went on to explain that the unit would soon trade its F-104s in for C-97G.

The first C-97s began arriving in September of 1962 and the unit was officially redesignated the 161st Air Transport Group on 1 Oct 1962.

Other changes had taken place since the conversion to the transport mission. The 197th Aeromedical Evacuation Flight was added providing flight nurses and aeromedical technicians to support an augmented aeromedical evacuation mission for the 161st. On 16 Aug 1968, the entire group was designated the 161st Aeromedical Airlift Group, but was changed to the 161st Military Airlift Group on 16 Dec, due to the rapidly changing needs of the Air Force at that time.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, Air National Guard tanker units were quickly called into action. An around-the-clock airlift began to support the build up to the conflict, Operation Desert Shield. Refueling was critical during the massive aircraft movement, the largest since World War II. Tankers and crews from the 161st were some of the first to arrive in Saudi Arabia. From the start and for the duration, tankers servicing the conflict left Phoenix weekly, loaded with maintenance and support technicians who worked in the Saudi Arabian desert up to 45 days, and in some cases more. As the allies prepared to move against Iraq, Phoenix Air Guard crews, maintenance personnel, medics, fire fighters, security forces and food service technicians were dispatched to bases in Europe and the United States. Before the war in the Gulf was concluded more than two-thirds of the force assigned to the 161st Air Refueling Group had served on active duty in some capacity to support the Middle East effort.

In 1994, 1995 and 1997 the unit deployed to Pisa, Italy where our tankers supported NATO operations in Bosnia. 1997 also saw the 161st facing challenges in the United Arab Emirates. The unit was vital to the success of Operation Deny Flight and Operation Southern Watch. 1 Oct 1995 marked another key change in the unit's long history. The 161st Air Refueling Group was redesignated as the 161st Air Refueling Wing under the USAF Air Mobility Command.

The 161st sent about 130 personnel to Operation Northern Watch early in 1999. Based at Incirlik Airbase, Turkey, the unit supported flight operations within the northern no-fly zone over Iraq. Early in the second quarter of 1999, 161st Copperheads were quickly pressed into service over Kosovo for Operation Allied Force. Nearly 200 unit airmen served on active duty for about two months, flying 125 missions to offload almost 2.5 million gallons of fuel. The airmen returned to Phoenix in late June 1999.



Air Force Order of Battle

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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 History. AZ ANG. *Copperhead 35; 161st Air Refueling Group; 1946-1981*. 1981.