

944 FIGHTER WING



MISSION

The mission of the 944 Fighter Wing is to train F-16 pilots and provide combat ready warriors for the expeditionary Air Force. During peacetime, the 944 trains reservists for worldwide deployments and has participated in real-world operational deployments in support of Operation Provide Comfort II and Operation Northern Watch (Northern Iraq), and Deny Flight/Decisive Edge (missions over Bosnia-Herzegovina), Operation Southern Watch (Southern Iraq) and has flown combat missions over the AOR during Operation Enduring Freedom. Additionally, approximately 100 reservists were mobilized in direct support of Operation Enduring Freedom and Noble Eagle.

The unit has an authorized strength of 813 personnel. Of the assigned personnel, 41 are full-time Air Reserve Technicians (ARTs) who provide continuity between weekend training periods.

LINEAGE

944 Troop Carrier Group, Medium established and activated in the Reserve, 28 Dec 1962

Organized, 17 Jan 1963

Redesignated 944 Tactical Airlift Group, 1 Jul 1967

Redesignated 944 Military Airlift Group (Associate), 25 Mar 1968

Inactivated, 1 Jul 1973

Redesignated 944 Tactical Fighter Group, 12 Nov 1986

Activated in the Reserve, 1 Jul 1987

Redesignated 944 Fighter Group, 1 Feb 1992

Redesignated 944 Fighter Wing, 1 Oct 1994

STATIONS

March AFB, CA, 17 Jan 1963

Norton AFB, CA, 25 Mar 1968-1 Jul 1973

Luke AFB, AZ, 1 Jul 1987

ASSIGNMENTS

Continental Air Command, 28 Dec 1962

452 Troop Carrier (later, 452 Military Airlift) Wing, 17 Jan 1963

349 Military Airlift Wing, 25 Jul 1969-1 Jul 1973

419 Tactical Fighter (later, 419 Fighter) Wing, 1 Jul 1987

Tenth Air Force, 1 Oct 1994

WEAPON SYSTEMS

C-119, 1963-1968

C-141, 1968-1973

F-16, 1987

COMMANDERS

Col Merle E. Larson, by Jun 1963

Col Richard P. McFarland, 25 Mar 1968

Col John F. McCormick, 12 Jul 1970

Col Richard P. McFarland, 1 Jun 1971

Lt Col Ronald R. Blalack, Jul 1971

Lt Col Clair A. Martin, 5 Aug 1971

Col Edward Dillon, 21 Dec 1971-1 Jul 1973

Col Jerry A. Wrucha, by Jan 1988

Col Richard L. Hall, 30 Oct 1989

Col Craig S. Ferguson, 16 Aug 1997

Col Derek P. Rydholm Sep 2004

Col Richard Scobee, 5 Aug 2007

Col Michael G. Popovich, 13 Apr 2009

Col Jose R. Monteagudo; 23 Dec 2010

Col Kurt J. Gallegos, 10 Feb 2013

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards

1 Jul 1970-30 Jun 1971

1 Jul 1987-31 Aug 1989

1 Jan 1990-31 Dec 1991

1 Jan 1992-30 Jun 1993
28 Nov 1993-6 Feb 1994
6 Sep 1998-5 Sep 2000

Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm
1 Jan 1972-28 Jan 1973

EMBLEM



Azure, in pale an arm and hand couped below the elbow argent grasping a torch gray enflamed or and gules, issuing from the arm in base and arched to chief bendwise a vapor trail of the second terminating in back of a flight symbol of the like; on a chief or, three helmets fesswise gray garnished gules, all within a diminished bordure or. **SIGNIFICANCE:** The emblem is symbolic of the Group. The color blue denotes the sky, the primary theater of Air Force operations, and yellow the sun and excellence of personnel in performing assigned tasks. The hand holding a torch is representative of freedom and liberty and is symbolic of the Statue of Liberty. Spanish helmets are associated with warriors (with the Spanish influence pronounced in California), ready to defend our country's freedom. The stylized aircraft with vapor trail depicts flight operations of the Group.



Azure, a sun demi radiated of seven Or a pile reversed chequy Argent and Sable overall a stylized thunderbird Gules garnished on the wings White and overall in base an arrowhead White charged with a pile reversed of the fifth; all within a diminished bordure Yellow. Attached below the disc a White scroll edged with a narrow Yellow border and inscribed "944th FIGHTER WING in Blue letters. **SIGNIFICANCE:** Blue and yellow are the Air Force colors. Blue alludes to the sky, the primary theater of Air Force operations. Yellow refers to the sun and the excellence required of Air Force personnel. The sun reflects the unit's home area. The thunderbird represents the power aircraft operated by the wing and the skillful personnel who fly and support them. The arrowhead symbolizes the weapons systems of the wing's aircraft and the unit's dedication to sacrifice in the defense of peace. (Approved, 20 Jun 1995)

MOTTO

ALWAYS READY

OPERATIONS

As the Military Airlift Command converted its strategic fleet from obsolescent piston-driven C-124 aircraft to modern jet transports, it could no longer provide the Air Force Reserve's C-124s with en route and overseas station maintenance support. Consequently, in January 1966 General Howell M. Estes, Jr., Commander, Military Airlift Command, proposed that the reserve forces operate the C-141s and C-5s in a corollary mode, that is, that they share aircraft owned by collocated active force units. Secretary McNamara endorsed the corollary concept as he continued his search for greater economy and efficiency. Acceptance of what would become the Air Force Reserve airlift associate program was neither rapid nor unanimous. Recalling the failure of the original corollary program of 1949-1951,

Continental Air Command officials did not rush to embrace the new concept, and they influenced General Estes to rename the new venture as the associate program. Air Force Reservists and Air National Guardsmen expressed reservations about the associate concept as they learned their units would not own the new C-141s and C-5s but would merely contribute aircrews and maintenance talent to collocated active force units. The reservists believed the new program was nothing more than a glorified individual program and feared they would eventually lose their identity. But, as General Marchbanks later acknowledged and as most Air Force Reserve officials came to realize, the Air Force Reserve really had no choice. Continued

operation of the C-124 was impractical, and in the pre-Total Force period, neither the Air Force nor Congress was inclined to make the expensive new aircraft directly available to the Air Force Reserve.

On January 15, 1968, the Continental Air Command organized the 944 Military Airlift Group (Provisional) as an associate group at Norton AFB with Col. Richard P. McFarland as commander. Under the provisions of a Continental Air Command programming plan and a Military Airlift Command program action directive, the associate program test got under way. In the absence of an overall Air Force regulation or manual to govern the associate program, ad hoc local agreements broke new ground in the increasingly complex arrangements between the two commands and their subordinate units. The commander of the 63d Military Airlift Wing, the active force parent wing, assumed operational control over the group during unit training assemblies and active duty training periods as well as aircrew members any time they integrated into the active wing for training purpose.

The test quickly confirmed the soundness of the associate concept, and the new unit, now designated the 944 Military Airlift Group (Associate), held its first training assembly on the last weekend of March 1968. A few days later, on April 4, TSgt. John P. Stappler became the first reservist to serve as an aircrew member on a C-141 operational mission. Two days later, Maj. Ronald D. Blalack, Capt. Woodrow T. Fail, and Capt. Anthony Colange flew a C-141 on a mission to Tinker AFB, Oklahoma, as the first all-reserve associate crew. The program made rapid strides. On August 14, 1968, the first all-reserve C-141 associate crew left Norton AFB on a Southeast Asia mission. Captain William Maxey was aircraft commander and Colonel McFarland, who had promised such a flight within six months, went as an additional crew member.

A number of factors contributed to the initial success of the 944. General Estes tolerated no resistance to the program within his headquarters, and Brig. Gen. Gilbert L. Curtis, 63d Military Airlift Wing Commander, enthusiastically supported the program. General Estes gave the 944 top priority for aircrew training spaces at the C-141 transition school, and General Curtis assured the reservists priority access to aircraft for training flights when possible. Of great importance, the two local commanders, General Curtis and Colonel McFarland, cooperated to make the unusual program work.

By January 2, 1974, the Air Force Reserve airlift associate program had grown to include wings at Norton, Travis, and McChord AFBs on the West Coast, and McGuire, Dover, and Charleston AFBs in the East. Aligned under these wings were four C-5 squadrons and thirteen C-141 squadrons which greatly augmented the Military Airlift Command's aircrew and maintenance resources. This reserve force routinely participated in the Military Airlift Command's worldwide operations. Although it was not an airlift unit, the 932d Aeromedical Airlift Group (Associate) was developed as a C-9 unit at Scott AFB, Illinois, as part of the overall associate program.

DOD approved the associate program in October 1967 and ordered the 944 Tactical Airlift Group to move from March AFB, California, to Norton AFB, California, and be reorganized as a

Military Airlift Group (Associate), to be associated with the 63d Military Airlift Wing (MAC). This initial group was considered a pilot unit to test and further define the program concept developed at MAC headquarters. Emphasis was placed on converting an optimum number of Reserve C-119 aircrew members rather than recruiting former MAC C-141 personnel. Furthermore, members of the C-124-equipped parent wing were not allowed to transfer because of their involvement in SEA support missions.

A particularly tight schedule, for a Reserve unit, was decreed for attaining C-2 status: 24 February 1969, 11 months after the activation date of 25 March 1968. The 944 achieved this C-2 milestone on 20 February 1969—in fact, it had sufficient crews already transport-qualified and scheduled for combat airlift training so that C-1 could be attained in short order.

On July 1, 1987, the 944 Tactical Fighter Group (Air Force Reserve) was activated at Luke AFB. The unit received new F-16C's (Block 32 models) direct from General Dynamics, Ft. Worth, Texas.

In Feb 89, the 944 deployed on its first overseas deployment to Operation Cope North, Japan. While there, the unit accomplished a first by deploying to Tsuiki AF, Japan, thus becoming the first U.S. Air Force unit to deploy and work with the Japanese self-defense forces there since WW-II.

In 1989, after being in existence for less than two years, the 944 was selected to represent the Air Force Reserve at Gunsmoke '89. Gunsmoke, the air-to-ground Air Force Fighter competition at Nellis AFB, Nevada is designed to demonstrate the capabilities of USAF tactical fighters and their crews under realistic conditions. Capt. Pat Shay from the 944 took the overall Air Force "Top Gun" award. In addition to taking the honors as "Top Gun," the 944 swept the maintenance categories, placing first in the aircraft maintenance and aircraft loading standings, winning five of six maintenance trophies. These were "Overall Top Maintenance Team," "Overall Combat Servicing," "Top F-16 Combat Servicing," "Top F-16 Maintenance Team," "Top Crew Chief," and second place in Aircraft Appearance. The unit amassed a total of 8901 out of a possible 9000 points.

In Sep 90, over 353 personnel from the 944 and 41st Aeromedical Patient Staging Squadron (APSS) were recalled to active duty in support of Operational Desert Shield/Storm. Personnel from the 944 Medical Squadron, 944 Combat Support Squadron/Transportation Section, and Firefighters from the 944 Civil Engineering Squadron were recalled to active duty.

In Oct 91, the 944 was chosen for the second time in its short history to represent the Air Force Reserve at the USAF Worldwide Gunnery Meet, Gunsmoke '91. The unit took overall second place out of 14 worldwide Air Force Fighter units and won the title of "Best F-16 Maintenance" and "Top F-16 Team." First Lieutenant Jim Wilkey won "Top Gun" in the F-16, the second time in a row a 944 aviator has won this prestigious award. In addition, the unit also garnered the "Top Crew Chief," "High Altitude Drive, Bombing First Place," and "Best Aircraft" awards.

In Nov 92, the 944 was the first Air Force Reserve unit to fly operational missions with the coalition task force over Northern Iraq in support of Provide Comfort II. The unit deployed six F-16C fighter aircraft, maintenance and support personnel, to a base of operations at Incirlik Air Base, Turkey. Over the course of the 7-week deployment period (27 Nov 92 to 19 Jan 93), the 944 deployed approximately 325 personnel. The unit flew, 1090 hours or 308 sorties with only 1 sortie lost due to maintenance. 944 F-16's were the first reserve fighter aircraft to ever have flown with the operational AIM-120A advanced Medium Range Air-to-Air (radar guided) Missile (AMRAAM). While in Turkey the reserve unit successfully integrated with active Air Force and coalition forces flying regular missions with British Jaguar, French F-1 Mirage, Turkish F-4, and U.S. Air Force fighter, tanks and AWAC aircraft. According to General Robert C. Oaks, Commander in Chief, USAFE, "You can be justifiably proud of the service of the men and women of the 944 Fighter Group. This premier unit has once again shown the nation and our leaders the value of our strong, well-trained, Air Force Reserve."

From 1 Jan - 5 Feb, 94, the 944 Fighter Group deployed over 400 personnel and six F-16C aircraft on its second major operational deployment in less than a year with a coalition task force. The deployment was in support of "Operation Deny Flight" (a UN resolution designed to ban military flights in airspace over Bosnia-Herzegovina). Utilizing 12 F-16C aircraft (6 from Carswell AFB, and 6 from the 944), 944 pilots flew 371 sorties, 1043.6 hours, with only eight cancellations due to weather or operations.

In Nov 94, the 944 Fighter Wing deployed to Patriot Mirage at Nellis AFB, NV.

From 13 - 27 Aug 95, the 944 Fighter Wing deployed with six aircraft to Patriot Angler in Elmendorf, AK.

From 2 Jan - 4 Feb 96, the 944 Fighter Wing deployed over 380 personnel and six F-16c aircraft on its third real world contingency deployment in four years with a United Nations Protection Force. The deployment was in support of Operation "Decisive Edge" (a UN resolution designed to ban military flights in airspace over Bosnia-Herzegovina). Utilizing 12 F-16C aircraft (6 from Carswell and 6 from the 944), the 944 Fighter Wing pilots flew 643 hours or 253 sorties.

From 23 May - 23 Jun 96, the 944 Fighter Wing deployed 400 personnel and eight F16C aircraft to Karup Denmark for participation in Coronet Harbor, a NATO sponsored exercise involving units from stateside bases, plus a number of countries within the NATO alliance such as Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and the United Kingdom. The significance of the exercise was the opportunity to train in virtually every possible mission the F16 can perform. This was also the first US Air Force Reserve or Air National Guard unit to duel with the MiG 29.

From 29 Jun - 27 Jul 96, the 944 Fighter Wing deployed 150 personnel and eight F16C aircraft to Elmendorf, AFB Alaska in support of Patriot Angler/Cope Thunder.

From 21 - 26 Oct 96, the 944 Fighter Wing participated in "William Tell", the U.S. Air Force's premier air-to-air weapons competition held bi-annually at Tyndall Air Force Base, Florida. Despite it being the first time the US Air Force Reserve competed in this event, the AFRES team comprised of both the 944 and the 419th from Hill AFB, finished first in aircraft maintenance, and Capt. Lenny Dick of the 944 took "Top Gun" honors for the F-16.

From 1 - 28 Jun 97, the 944 Fighter Wing deployed eight aircraft and over 300 reservist to Patriot Pacific at Hickam AFB, Hawaii. While there, the wing had the opportunity to exercise with the Navy, Army, and Hawaii Air National Guard.

From 3 May - 8 Jun, 98, the 944 Fighter Wing deployed over 200 personnel and six F-16C aircraft on its fourth major operational deployment in five years in support of Operation Northern Watch at Incirlik Air Base, Turkey. Utilizing 12 F-16C aircraft (6 from Homestead ARB, and 6 from the 944), 944 pilots flew 107 sorties, for a total of 364.1 hours.

From 8 - 22 Aug 98, the 944 Fighter Wing deployed 320 personnel and six F16C aircraft to Elmendorf, AFB Alaska in support of Patriot Angler II.

From 5 May - 4 Jun 99, the 944 Fighter Wing return to Incirlik Air Base Turkey for the fifth time in six years in support of Operation Northern Watch.

From 7 - 21 Aug 99, the 944 Fighter Wing deployed 424 personnel and 10 F16C aircraft to Elmendorf, AFB Alaska in support of Patriot Angler III.

From 2 - 16 Oct 99, the 944 Fighter Wing deployed 91 personnel and eight F16C aircraft to Key West, NAS Florida in support of Patriot Snapper I.

On 3 Mar 00, the 301 FS was activated as a Reserve associate unit to Luke's 56th FW, and Air Education and Training Command unit. Reserve instructor pilots from the re-activated 301 FS will fly 56 FW F-16's to train active-duty student pilots for their multi-role mission. The Reserve instructor pilot associate program is a joint Air Force Reserve Command and AETC initiative, designed to help with the Air Force's current active-duty pilot retention problem. It gives the total force the option of capturing experienced fighter pilots who leave active duty but who still want to be a part of the Air Force Reserve. The 944 FW will have administrative control of its pilots through the 301 FS commander and the 10th Air Force commander, while operational control will reside with the active duty 56 FW.

From 5 - 31 Aug 00, the 944 Fighter Wing return to Incirlik Air Base Turkey for the sixth time in seven years in support of Operation Northern Watch. The month-long mission was threefold: to show a strong military presence, monitor Iraqi military movements and hardware and prevent Iraqi military flights into an area north of the 36th parallel. During the deployment, the 302d Fighter Squadron dropped live munitions in combat for the first time since 1945. On several occasions Iraq anti-aircraft artillery gunners or surface-to-air missile batteries engaged the 302 FS pilots. They retaliated with GBU-12s, a 500-pound laser guided bomb, with devastating

accuracy.

On July 1, 2001 the Wing changed gaining commands from Air Combat Command to Air Education and Training Command. This change was the result of a mission change from combat to training F-16 student pilots. On June 7, 2002 the 944 Fighter Wing graduated its first student pilot class of six new F-16 active duty pilots.

The 944 was also the first Reserve F-16 Fighter unit to participate in Provide Comfort II and carry the AIM 120A AMRAAM. The wing was also given the opportunity to participate in "Coronet Harbor," a NATO sponsored exercise involving units from stateside bases, plus a number of countries within the NATO alliance such as Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and the United Kingdom. The exercise enabled the 944 to train in virtually every possible mission the F-16 can perform. It was also the first U S Air Force Reserve or Air National Guard unit to duel with the MiG 29.

At Luke AFB, the first of the 944 FW's 17 F-16s left for Hill AFB, Utah, in mid-August, where it will undergo Falcon Star, a life-extending set of upgrades. After the program is completed, the aircraft will make its new home at Nellis AFB, Nev. The wing's remaining 16 aircraft will begin leaving Luke in March 2007 bound for various locations including the Tucson Air National Guard headquarters; Edwards AFB, Calif.; and the California ANG in Fresno. Luke's historic 302nd Fighter Squadron, which traces its lineage back to the Tuskegee Airmen, will find a new home at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska. The 302nd will join two active-duty squadrons as a Reserve associate unit flying the Air Force's next-generation fighter aircraft, the F-22 Raptor. 2006

944 FW Bids Farewell to its Last Three F-16s Members of the 944 Fighter Wing at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., bid farewell to the organization's last three F-16 Fighting Falcons Feb. 14. The aircraft, which were part of the 302nd Fighter Squadron, were reassigned to other locations as a result of the latest Base Realignment and Closure Commission recommendations. Two of the jets went to Nellis AFB, Nev., where they will become part of the aggressor squadron. The third jet went to Hill AFB, Utah, where it is undergoing maintenance before moving on to its new home with the Air National Guard in Tucson, Ariz. Master Sgt. Bob Rydzynski, a 944 Aircraft Maintenance Squadron crew chief, worked on the F-16s ever since they arrived at Luke from the factory in 1987. "Today is an emotional day," Sergeant Rydzynski said. "On one hand, I have a great feeling of pride seeing my jet fly, but at the same time, I know it's not coming back." The 302nd FW, will be inactivated at Luke AFB but will return to Air Force Reserve Command when it stands up as an F-22 associate unit at Elmendorf AFB, Alaska. The 944 FW will continue its mission of training F-16 pilots. 2007

Air Force Unit Histories

Created: 27 Oct 2020

Updated:

Sources

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