

AU/ACSC/08-8361/AY06

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

AIR UNIVERSITY

FORGOTTEN HEROES –  
U.S. ANG FIGHTER SQUADRONS OF VIETNAM

by

Joseph B. Speed, Major, USAF

A Research Report Submitted to the Faculty

In Partial Fulfillment of the Graduation Requirements

Instructor: Dr. Michael E. Weaver

Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama

April 2006

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## CONTEXT

The 1960's was a turbulent decade for the United States and for America's military in particular. It was in this shifting sea of post-Cold War change that America's military attempted to adapt to the new realities of military operations, ranging from nuclear deterrence to "small wars." Troubling Cold War flare-ups, such as the Berlin confrontation and the Cuban missile crisis, were precursors for one of America's most divisive events, that is, Vietnam. This era-defining event changed, among other things, the ways in which the military was viewed by its own country and the world.

In the 1960s, the military perceived Vietnam as yet one more trouble spot to "fix" in its distinguished history of victories. Realistically, few could anticipate the importance, and lasting scars, of those years of America's involvement in Vietnam. Indeed, the subjective importance of who "went" to Vietnam and who "stayed" would become fodder for tales of shame, divide a generation, and even take center stage in national elections decades later. In retrospect, it was truly a time of change and a coming of age for a nation and its armed forces. Although, at the time, the military had its hands full just keeping up with the world's demands.

Of particular importance to the military during this time was its attempt to transform itself from an organization dedicated to massive mobilization in response to World Wars to a new, tailorable force capable of responding to a wide range of military operations. Part of this transformation was the attempt to change the military's reserve components, the Reserve and National Guard, into a front-line force capable of quickly integrating and fighting along side their active duty counterparts. However, the recent performance of these reserve components had been mixed, at best.

The inauspicious performances of the Air Guard during the Korean conflict created distrust and disdain among their active duty counterparts. Although two Air National Guard (ANG) fighter wings were sent to the Far East and compiled excellent combat records, the vast majority of activated ANG fighter units lacked flying proficiency, had inadequate gunnery and unsatisfactory bombing proficiency, and had below average aircraft maintenance.<sup>1</sup> The ANG's spotty record to date caused General Curtis Lemay to remark in the fall of 1959 that "weekend warriors were not much good to the air force."<sup>2</sup> The performance of the ANG improved only marginally in the following years.

For example, in 1961 the Guard and Reserve, and in particular the Air National Guard, had been called upon to assist with the Berlin crisis. Indeed, between October 1961 and August 1962, nearly thirty-three percent of the Air Guard's strength was mobilized to help serve as a diplomatic counter-weight to Soviet efforts to eject the western powers from Berlin. However, their success was limited and the product of outstanding improvisation rather than sound reserve forces policy and planning.<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, following the Berlin crisis the Department of Defense's (DoD) emphasis upon stronger conventional military forces under the flexible response strategy, and Secretary of Defense (SECDEF) Robert S. McNamara's determination to create a select force of immediately-deployable reserve units in support of that policy, provided the impetus for the transformation of the Air Guard.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the growing American involvement in Southeast Asia (SEA) had an important impact in that air

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<sup>1</sup> "Prelude to the Total Force: The Air National Guard 1943-1969," Chapter V, p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> Mahon, John, K., "History of the Militia and the National Guard," Chapter 15, p.222.

<sup>3</sup> "Prelude to the Total Force: The Air National Guard 1943-1969," Chapter V, p. 122.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.143.

guardsmen and reservists increasingly shouldered a growing share of the burden of routine Air Force operations. However, Secretary McNamara's intensified emphasis upon reserve readiness was of foreshadowing importance to the Air Guard.

Frustrated by Congress in his attempts to reduce the size of the Army's reserve components and merge them into a single organization, McNamara directed the creation of a Selected Reserve Force within each of the armed forces. This force, which included nine tactical fighter groups from the Air Guard, would constitute America's strategic reserve while the bulk of the active duty establishment was preoccupied with SEA. The Department of Defense authorized Selected Reserve Force units to draw equipment on a high priority basis, recruit to wartime manpower levels, and perform additional paid training. It did not take long for this program, and the Air National Guard in particular, to be tested by real-world events.

In January of 1968, the seizure of the USS Pueblo by North Korea shocked the United States and put pressure on President Lyndon B. Johnson, who was already struggling to balance military commitments against inadequate resources and to hold together declining public support for the Vietnam War.<sup>5</sup> The administration had been under fire, from both the public and professional military advisors, for deciding not to mobilize reserve units, which were draft-exempt, to augment the initial American military buildup in Vietnam and rely, instead, on volunteers and draftees to fill the expanded ranks of the armed forces. Not only did this decision incense many Americans whose sons and husbands were being drafted to risk death in SEA, but also called into question the military utility of the reserves, the socio-economic biases of a mostly white, middle-class reserve force, and the political acceptability of reserve forces in general.

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<sup>5</sup> "Prelude to the Total Force: The Air National Guard 1943-1969," Chapter VI, p. 156.

In late January, 1968, the Tet offensive in South Vietnam placed additional pressures on U.S. military resources, further exacerbating military requirements and domestic pressures. Faced with increased military pressures and unrelenting public ones, President Johnson, in order to “display American resolve” and minimize chances of armed conflict with the North Koreans, dispatched Air Force aircraft to South Korea and mobilized approximately 14,000 naval and air reservists. Included in these activated air reservists were eight tactical fighter groups whose units were participants in the SECDEF initiated Selected Reserve Force program, called “Beef Broth” in the Air Force (and later “Combat Beef”).

Out of these eight activated tactical fighter groups, the SECDEF alerted four Air Guard F-100C fighter squadrons in late April, 1968, for deployment to South Vietnam. Each squadron deployed to South Vietnam and spent approximately one year valiantly fighting and dying alongside their active duty counterparts.<sup>6</sup> These units were Denver’s 120<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS), Sioux City’s 174<sup>th</sup> TFS, Albuquerque’s 188<sup>th</sup> TFS, and Niagara Falls’ 136<sup>th</sup> TFS. In addition, the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS, an active Air Force unit deployed to South Vietnam, was approximately 75 percent manned by air guardsmen from mid-1968 to mid-1969 and contributed mightily, and professionally, to the war effort.

Collectively, these Air Guard units flew approximately 30,000 combat sorties and 50,000 combat hours in SEA. Upon first glance, these milestones are significant in themselves. Upon further examination of their service in SEA, one consistently finds countless records of achievement, pride, and heroism in the face of grave danger and thankless work. While few have ever heard of the Air Guard’s participation in combat

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<sup>6</sup> “Prelude to the Total Force: The Air National Guard 1943-1969,” Chapter VI, p. 158.

operations in Vietnam, fewer still know of their sacrifices, accomplishments, and heroic deeds. While not a complete record, what follows is a brief, historical account of these forgotten heroes' legacy of bravery and professionalism.

### **“COLORADO COUGARS”**

The 120<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, an F-100C fighter squadron based at Buckley ANG Base, Colorado, was the first ANG unit called to active duty in January, 1968.<sup>7</sup> The “Colorado Cougars”<sup>8</sup> were well prepared, as they had gained valuable experience with regular Air Force units by participating in Exercise Deep Furrow. Deep Furrow was a six-day North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) exercise in Turkey in October, 1967, in which twelve Colorado ANG F-100 aircraft and 125 men participated. Deep Furrow was the first such NATO exercise to utilize an Air National Guard unit.

At this time, the 120<sup>th</sup> was well known for its readiness and capabilities. In November, 1967, the 120<sup>th</sup> was awarded the “Most Operational Readiness Plaque” by the Air National Guard Association. Additionally, in February, 1968, the Commander of Tactical Air Command (TAC) presented the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award (AFOUA) to the parent organization of the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS, the 140<sup>th</sup> TFG, for “meritorious service as an increased readiness unit.”<sup>9</sup> To many, it was no surprise that the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS would be the first ANG fighter unit to be called to Vietnam.

The 120<sup>th</sup> TFS began its deployment to Vietnam, from Buckley ANG base, on April 28<sup>th</sup>, 1968. Led by squadron commander Robert C. Cherry, twenty F-100Cs arrived at Phan Rang AB, Republic of Vietnam (RVN) on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, with the remainder of the support personnel and material following close behind. The aircraft and personnel were

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<sup>7</sup> History of 35<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, Phan Rang A.B. RVN, April – June 1968, Volume II.

<sup>8</sup> “Colorado ANGs Prove Themselves in Early Combat”, 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force News, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1968.

<sup>9</sup> History of 35<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, Phan Rang A.B. RVN, April – June 1968, Volume II.

then assigned to the 35<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (TFW), which included three active duty (AD) F-100D/F fighter squadrons, one B-57 tactical bomber squadron, one RAAF Mk-20 bomber squadron, and various other operational and support units. In all, 31 officers and 365 enlisted men were involved in the deployment. Of this total, approximately 29 officers and 125 enlisted men remained with the squadron. The others augmented various units within the 35<sup>th</sup> TFW.

The pilots began orientation flights on May 8<sup>th</sup> and all of the aircrews were checked out and ready to fly combat missions within two weeks. As an indicator of their readiness, the 120<sup>th</sup> deployed with 100 percent of its unit operationally ready and with 100 percent of the pilots flight leader qualified. Additionally, 33 percent of the pilots were qualified as instructors. The pilots of the 120<sup>th</sup> integrated with host active duty fighter Wing operations immediately and by the end of June already had over 70 confirmed enemies Killed by Air (KBA) and over 900 bunkers and 40 sampans destroyed. As remarked by a 120<sup>th</sup> flight commander a short time later, "...it's not bad for a bunch of civilians, but you ain't seen nothing yet!"<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, the 120<sup>th</sup> became well known throughout II, III and IV Corps (and Laos) and letters of commendation from Forward Air Controllers (FACs) began to arrive, praising them for their accuracy and professional skills.<sup>11</sup> Normally, the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS was tasked with flying missions such as Direct Air Support, Close Air Support (CAS), Trail Dust (air cover for defoliation missions), Bookie Escort (air cover for transport aircraft on re-supply missions), Landing Zone preparation (suppression of enemy during landing of ground troops), and Landing Zone construction (blowing down trees for helicopter

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<sup>10</sup> "Colorado ANGs Prove Themselves in Early Combat", 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force News, August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1968.

<sup>11</sup> History of 35<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, October – December 1968.

landings). Additionally, the 120<sup>th</sup> was tasked with providing aircraft and pilots to sit 24 hour alert, primarily to assist Troops-in-Contact (TIC) situations.

The 120<sup>th</sup> TFS's pilots faced danger on a daily basis. Indeed, in some of the first months of the deployment twenty 120<sup>th</sup> TFS aircraft received battle damage.<sup>12</sup> For example, on December 29<sup>th</sup>, 1968, the unit lost an F-100C to hostile ground fire. The pilot, Captain Joe O'Neill, ejected safely and was recovered unhurt by an Army helicopter of the 64<sup>th</sup> Advanced Team, MACV.<sup>13</sup> Subsequently, other such encounters followed, not all of them ending happily.

On 27 March, 1969, the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS lost an F-100C while on a strafing pass in the vicinity of Song Be Mountain.<sup>14</sup> The aircraft was on its second strafing pass when it was hit by enemy ground fire, causing a premature napalm bomb explosion. The pilot, Major Clyde Seiler, was killed. Considering that the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS was within weeks of returning home at that time, the unit's only pilot loss was especially heartbreaking.

Nonetheless, while the pilots were flying into harm's way, it was often just as dangerous on the ground. This was obvious as some of the first "awards" given to the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS were Purple Hearts awarded to 120<sup>th</sup> TFS enlisted members for wounds sustained in mortar attacks on the base. Indeed, during the 120<sup>th</sup>'s tour at Phan Rang the enemy subjected the base to 15 separate attacks, with close to 400 rounds of enemy mortars and rockets impacting the base. As one 120<sup>th</sup> report noted, "There are no rear echelons in this war."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> History of 35<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, July – September 1968.

<sup>13</sup> Quarterly History Summary, 120<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, Phan Rang Air Base Vietnam, 1 Oct 1968 – 31 Dec 1968.

<sup>14</sup> History of 35<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, January – March 1969.

<sup>15</sup> Quarterly History Summary, 120<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, Phan Rang Air Base Vietnam, 1 Jan 1969 – 31 Mar 1969

Like the dangers that they shared with the enlisted members, the pilots were not the only personnel of the 120<sup>th</sup> to shine. The 120<sup>th</sup>, arguably, had the best maintenance unit of the entire 35<sup>th</sup> TFW. For example, during the 120<sup>th</sup>'s tour of duty they maintained an Operational Rate of over 86 percent (USAF standard was 71 percent) and an abort rate of 0.5 percent (7<sup>th</sup> AF standard was 3 percent). Even more, the 120<sup>th</sup> set the wing record of seven days without a dud weapon or an unfulfilled sortie request from the wing. Individually, the squadron received laurels such as one of the weapons load crews from the 120<sup>th</sup> was selected as the 35<sup>th</sup> TFW outstanding load crew for August, 1968, and in January, 1969, one of its crew chiefs was the 35<sup>th</sup> TFW crew chief of the month. .

The men of the Colorado ANG had truly racked up an outstanding list of accomplishments and awards before their return home in April, 1969. The 120<sup>th</sup> was credited with over 750 confirmed KBAs, and 4500 bunkers and 350 sampans destroyed. Additionally, the 120<sup>th</sup>, to include its enlisted members, were recognized with numerous awards such as Distinguished Flying Crosses, Air Medals, Bronze Star Medals with Combat Vs, and Purple Hearts. Furthermore, the quality and expertise of the 120<sup>th</sup> was evident to the entire wing. Of the over 200 members of the Colorado ANG that were assigned to other various units in the 35<sup>th</sup> TFW, 43 of these men held positions of commander, NCOIC or supervisors in the units in which they were serving.<sup>16</sup>

The men of the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS in Vietnam, then numbering 317 enlisted men and 26 officers, returned home in April of 1969 to exultant family members and a proud state. Indeed, the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS had convincingly shown why they were the first activated, and chosen to be the first deployed ANG fighter squadron of the Vietnam War.

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<sup>16</sup> Quarterly History Summary, 120<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, Phan Rang Air Base Vietnam, 1 Jan 1969 – 31 Mar 1969.

## THE BATS

While the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS was the first ANG fighter squadron deployed to South Vietnam, the 174<sup>th</sup> TFS was close on their heels. The 174<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron “Bats”, an F-100C unit from Sioux City, Iowa, was similar to the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS in that it was assigned to the parent 140<sup>th</sup> TFW, Buckley ANG Base, Colorado. Similarly, the Bats were activated on 25 January, 1968, and were told to be prepared to depart for overseas within 72 hours.<sup>17 18</sup> However, the 174<sup>th</sup>’s departure was delayed until 14 May and did not arrive in Vietnam until 17 May. Subsequently, it was transferred to the 37<sup>th</sup> TFW, Phu Cat Air Base, Republic of Vietnam.

The activated 174<sup>th</sup>, which included teachers, farmers, a local weather man, three father-son combinations and four brothers, were augmented with personnel from their parent 185<sup>th</sup> TFG which was, in effect, dissolved by the departure of its personnel.<sup>19</sup> In other words, the augmentation provided to support the deployment of the 174<sup>th</sup> so depleted the ranks of the 185<sup>th</sup> TFG that it did not have enough manpower to continue operations in their absence. Of the deploying group, Lt Col Gordon L. Young led 129 airmen and 29 officers specifically assigned to the 174<sup>th</sup> after their arrival in Vietnam. The Bats brought a total of 22 F-100Cs to Vietnam.

As an indication of their readiness and professionalism, all of the pilots of the 174<sup>th</sup> were Operationally Ready (OR), which included theater indoctrination and three missions, within 11 days of arrival in Vietnam. By the end of September, every pilot of the 174<sup>th</sup> was flight lead qualified for combat missions in Vietnam. Additionally, the

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<sup>17</sup> Gross, Charles, J., “Prelude to the Total Force: The Air National Guard 1943-1969,” p. 156, The United States Air Force General Histories, Office of Air Force History, 1984.

<sup>18</sup> “185<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing, Iowa Air National Guard, 1946-1996”, p. 84, 185<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing, Sioux City, Iowa.

<sup>19</sup> History of 174<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, 1 April 1968 – 30 June 1968.

174<sup>th</sup> TFS picked up an alert commitment during June, which included two alert aircraft prepped to support possible TIC situations, loaded and maintained on 15 minute alert status with two alert crews, day and night.

Within barely one month of flying combat missions, most of which were under the control of FACs, the Bats had flown over 1300 hours and were credited with 17 confirmed KBA, 111 destroyed VC structures, 54 destroyed fortifications and at least 2 destroyed gun positions. During the subsequent three month period, the 174<sup>th</sup> flew 2048 combat effective sorties, which was the highest combat sortie count of the four squadrons in the Wing. Additionally, the 174<sup>th</sup> dropped between 32 percent and 33 percent of the total bombs for the entire Wing, which included four fighter squadrons, during this period. Lastly, the 174<sup>th</sup>'s first full three month reporting period ended with over 400 confirmed KBA, over 300 destroyed hostile structures, 25 destroyed gun positions, and a host of bridges, trucks, tunnels, sampans, and other structures destroyed. Their accomplishments were on par, if not surpassing, many of their active duty counterparts.

Much like the 120<sup>th</sup> TFS, the 174<sup>th</sup> TFS's maintenance section was superb, as well. During the July – September 1968 reporting period the 174<sup>th</sup> was “consistently C-1 throughout the period” which reflected “the exceptional esprit de corps and high professional standards for which the squadron has become known and respected.”<sup>20</sup> As a matter of fact, the 174<sup>th</sup> TFS was the only squadron whose mission readiness (“C”) rating did not drop below C-2 during this period, having the C-2 rating for only a period of six days. This meant that the squadron maintained the highest level of mission readiness

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<sup>20</sup> History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, July – September 1968, Volume II, Phu Cat Air Base, RVN.

possible during the entire quarter, except for six days. The squadron's performance helped the entire wing by significantly bolstering the TFW's overall "C" average<sup>21</sup>.

Unfortunately, the 174<sup>th</sup> experienced its first loss on 14 July 1968 when 1Lt Warren K. Brown was shot down by enemy ground fire while on an airstrike in the A Shau valley. Lt Brown was killed when his parachute failed to fully deploy after he ejected from his disabled aircraft.<sup>22</sup> The 174<sup>th</sup> lost another aircraft, but rescued the pilot, when it went down due to suspected battle damage on 22 September, 1968. On that day, shortly after takeoff, 1Lt Kuldar Visnapuu felt a "thud" and his F-100C quickly decelerated. 1Lt Visnapuu attempted to return to Phu Cat but had to eject near the ocean. An Army helicopter crew picked him up, returning him within 30 minutes from the time he took off.<sup>23</sup>

During the October – November 1968 timeframe, the Bats began flying missions over North Vietnam, due to a 37<sup>th</sup> TFW commitment, only to have the emphasis changed again, due to the 1 November "bombing halt" of North Vietnam, to Laos against infiltration routes<sup>24</sup>. These missions constituted 60-80 percent of the squadron's daily sorties and the enemy normally fired at the pilots with a combination of 12.5mm, 14.7mm, 23mm, 37mm, and 85mm antiaircraft fire. The heavy concentration of ground fire caused the 174<sup>th</sup> to fly higher, in order to avoid most of the antiaircraft fire, and drop a large number of "hard loads" on their missions. A hard load is slick bombs that can accurately travel from the higher release altitudes, caused by the antiaircraft fire avoidance maneuvers, and still hit the target with a high degree of reliability. The change

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<sup>21</sup> History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, July – September 1968, Volume I, Phu Cat Air Base, RVN.

<sup>22</sup> History of 174<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, 1 July 1968 – 30 September 1968.

<sup>23</sup> "185<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing, Iowa Air National Guard, 1946-1996", p. 84, 185<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing, Sioux City, Iowa.

<sup>24</sup> History of 174<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, 1 October 1968 – 31 December 1968.

in weapons had little effect on the Bats' results. During the October – December timeframe the 174<sup>th</sup> TFS was credited with over 50 confirmed KBA, over 190 destroyed hostile structures, over 150 destroyed bunkers, 25 destroyed gun positions, and various other enemy emplacements and sites.

Despite their prowess of bringing destruction to the enemy, the 174<sup>th</sup> TFS showed itself a friend to those in need. As Christmas approached, the men of the 174<sup>th</sup> sponsored a drive to help the children of the Kim Chau orphanage, which was located about 10 miles from their base at Phu Cat. By Christmas, the 174<sup>th</sup> had received and distributed more than 300 boxes of gifts for the orphans, received from individuals and small organizations in Iowa. Sioux City doctors also sent many boxes of medical supplies to one of their associates deployed to the combat zone. In fact, so many packages were received for the orphanage that parts of the packages were taken to the Qui Hoa leprosarium near Qui Nhon and the refugee center in Phu Cat village.<sup>25</sup>

It did not take long for the 174<sup>th</sup>'s accomplishments to become widely known. By the spring of 1969 the Bats had been awarded the AFOUA, the Presidential Unit Citation, and were key contributors to the 37<sup>th</sup> TFW being awarded the Southeast Asia Outstanding Fighter Wing Award. Even the 37<sup>th</sup> TFW's outgoing commander, LeRoy J Manor, lauded the "outstanding skills of the Air National Guard personnel."<sup>26 27</sup>

Although the 174<sup>th</sup> began preparing for their departure in May, 1969, their performance never lagged. During this time the 174<sup>th</sup> continued to lead the Wing in such important areas as low dud rates for munitions, repeatedly being the best of the four

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<sup>25</sup> History of 174<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, 1 October 1968 – 31 December 1968.

<sup>26</sup> End of Tour Report, LeRoy J. Manor, Commander, 37<sup>th</sup> TFW, May 1968 - April 1969.

<sup>27</sup> Manor, LeRoy J., online, at <http://home.earthlink.net/~aircommando1/sontayra1.htm>. (This same commander, who thought so highly of the ANG personnel, would lead the daring Son Tay raid one year later.)

squadrons. This was especially important since the enemy often used “dud” munitions, or those weapons that were released but did not explode, as booby-traps, on friendly personnel. The enemy did this by disassembling the dud weapons and using the explosives against friendly ground personnel. Additionally, the 174<sup>th</sup> continued to rack up amazing statistics such as having over 98 percent of its sorties effective and consistently having the highest OR rates in the Wing.

The 174<sup>th</sup> redeployed from Phu Cat on 12 May 1969, and arrived in Sioux City, Iowa, on 14 May 1969 and prepared for subsequent deactivation. The Bats left behind a memorial of achievements and a legacy of greatness. Prior to their departure from Phu Cat, Commander in Chief, Pacific Air Forces (CINCPACAF) sent his congratulations and thanks to the officers and airmen of the 174<sup>th</sup> for their “splendid contribution to the war effort in Vietnam.”<sup>28</sup> The men of the 174<sup>th</sup> brought home 12 Silver Stars, 35 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 30 Bronze Star Medals, 115 Air Force Commendation Medals (AFCMs), and some 300 Air Medals.<sup>29</sup> Best of all for the men of the 174<sup>th</sup>, when they returned home they got something that few Vietnam Veterans received, that is, a hearty “Welcome Home” by an entire community that was thankful for their service to its country.

### **ENCHILADA AIR FORCE**

The 188<sup>th</sup> TFS “Tacos” were federalized for active duty on January 26, 1968, under the command of Lt Col Fred J. Fink.<sup>30</sup> Preparation for deployment to SEA consisted of sea survival training at Homestead AFB, Florida, a 3 day survival school at Kirtland AFB, and night attack training at Cannon AFB, New Mexico for all pilots.

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<sup>28</sup> History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, April – June 1969, Volume II.

<sup>29</sup> “185<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing, Iowa Air National Guard, 1946-1996”, p. 84, 185<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing, Sioux City, Iowa.

<sup>30</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 April 1968 – 30 June 1968, Volume I – Narrative and Appendices.

Orders for deployment were received in May 1968 with a deployment date of 4 June, 1968. Out of a total of 800 personnel activated within the 150<sup>th</sup> TFG, the parent organization of the 188<sup>th</sup> TFS, only 28 officers and 334 airmen were authorized to deploy to Vietnam.

In addition, aircraft to be deployed consisted of 20 F-100Cs and 2 F-100Fs (two-seat versions). After some minor en-route mechanical issues, such as two jets with inoperative radios and a fuel leak in the tanker aircraft's refueling hose, the 188<sup>th</sup> TFS reached Tuy Hoa Air Base, RVN with 18 F-100Cs and 2 F-100Fs on 7 June, 1968, and was subsequently assigned to the 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing. The last two F-100Cs arrived on 8 June, completing the authorized deployment of 22 F-100s and 25 pilots. The 31<sup>st</sup> TFW was the largest wing in SEA and the only fighter wing that had been fraggged, as of the end of 1968, for all of the Corps areas on a daily basis plus about 40 sorties into Laos.<sup>31</sup> The arrival of the 188<sup>th</sup> TFS brought the number of tactical fighter squadrons in the 31<sup>st</sup> TFW to five.

Pilot checkout began on 13 June, which consisted of one backseat ride in an F-100F, one front seat ride in an F-100F, and 18 F-100C missions as wingmen to become flight leads. By 30 June, the 188<sup>th</sup> TFS had 22 pilots operationally (combat) ready and had flown a total of 352 combat sorties. Enthusiasm was running high among the members of the 188<sup>th</sup> TFS. According to the Commander of the 188<sup>th</sup>, "the only complaints were from those people he had to leave behind in New Mexico."<sup>32</sup>

It did not take long for the 188<sup>th</sup> to make a big impression. By the end of July, letters of commendation were already arriving for the Tacos' aerial expertise and bravery.

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<sup>31</sup> End of Tour Report, Col Abner M. Aust Jr., Cmdr 31<sup>st</sup> TFW, Tuy Hoa Air Base, RVN, 3 May 1968 – 8 February, 1969.

<sup>32</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 April 1968 – 30 June 1968, Volume I – Narrative and Appendices.

For example, on 23 July the HQ Provisional Corps Vietnam commended Taco 51 flight for its “professionalism” and “outstanding accuracy” for their part in a mission in the A Shau interdiction program.<sup>33</sup> Again, in October, 1968 Taco 01 flight was commended by the TACP from the ROK Capital Division for delivering “all ordnance” within “ten meters of the point requested.”<sup>34</sup> The Fighter Duty Officer of the TACP commented that this was “commendable under ideal conditions and almost unbelievable under the actual conditions.”

During July the 188<sup>th</sup> TFS had the highest number of hours flown among the five fighter squadrons of the 31<sup>st</sup> TFW.<sup>35</sup> The 188<sup>th</sup> TFS repeated this feat in August and September. Additionally, the 188<sup>th</sup> TFS had the highest “C-1” rating (92 percent) of the entire Wing during the July-September quarter.<sup>36</sup>

By the end of the year the Tacos had ranged the skies over SEA from the Mekong Delta to the Steel Tiger area in Laos, passing their 6000<sup>th</sup> hour of flight time in country.<sup>37</sup> The 188<sup>th</sup> TFS regularly encountered 23 and 37 millimeter (air burst) automatic weapons fire and had two aircraft hit by enemy groundfire during this quarter. However, both aircraft managed to reach a safe haven without further damage. The last quarter of 1968 also saw the highest KBA of the squadron to date, with 119 confirmed and 72 estimated.

Others noticed the experience and expertise of the Taco pilots, as well. By the end of the year two Taco pilots were TDY to Phu Cat as part of the then-top secret, and extremely challenging, “Misty” FAC program which flew interdiction missions in North

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<sup>33</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 July 1968 – 30 September 1968, Volume IV – Supporting Documents.

<sup>34</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 Oct 68 – 31 Dec 68, Volume III – Supporting Documents Part 2.

<sup>35</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 July 1968 – 30 September 1968, Volume II – Appendices.

<sup>36</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 July 1968 – 30 September 1968, Volume I – Narrative (sic)

<sup>37</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 Oct 68 – 31 Dec 68, Volume II – Appendices.

Vietnam and Laos.<sup>38</sup> As of 31 December, Captain Cassaro had just left the squadron to join the program and Captain Kretz was scheduled to return in mid-January. There were additional Taco volunteers for the “Mistys” but the number of Misty slots authorized was then presently filled. At the turn of the New Year the Taco pilots averaged 150 combat missions and 220 hours of combat time.

Unfortunately, like the other ANG fighter squadrons, close calls, and eventually tragedy, found the Tacos as well. On 31 January, 1969, Captain Jerry N. Williams, flying an F-100C, lost elevator control returning from a combat mission due to battle damage.<sup>39</sup> The aircraft crashed but the pilot ejected and was picked up about 40 minutes later. However, on 4 January 1969, Major Bobby Neeld and 1Lt Mitchell S. Lane were returning from a day combat mission when they apparently crashed at sea while diverting, due to weather, to Phan Rhang Air Base, RVN. No wreckage or aircrews were found, and the pilots were subsequently listed as missing-in-action (MIA). Lastly, Captain Michael T. Adams was killed in action on 4 May, 1969, when he made a high speed ejection from a rocket pass.<sup>40</sup> A chute was sighted but he was reported dead on recovery.

In February and March, the 188<sup>th</sup> was still at the top of its game, posting 92 percent and 93 percent “effective combat sorties” rates and dropping over 1300 tons of bombs.<sup>41</sup> It had already accumulated 7 DFCs, 3 Bronze Stars with “Vs”, and 25 Air Medals, among others. Indeed, the 31<sup>st</sup> TFW stated that the 188<sup>th</sup>’s “mission

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<sup>38</sup> Shepperd, Don, “Misty – First Person Stories of the F-100 Misty Fast FACs in the Vietnam War.”

<sup>39</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 Jan – 31 Mar 69, Volume I – Narrative.

<sup>40</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 April – 30 June 1969.

<sup>41</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 Jan – 31 Mar 69, Volume IV – Supporting Documents Chapter III.

performance” in all areas “is near perfect” and that their “daily accomplishments demonstrate that they are a true asset to the 31<sup>st</sup> TFW.”

The 188<sup>th</sup> impressed the Inspector General (IG) team of the 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force. During a 27 March – 5 April, 1969 IG visit, the 188<sup>th</sup> TFS scored an “outstanding” for Operations and Administration. The IG team stated that “this unit clearly identified itself as a superior ANG unit on active duty with the USAF” and that “discipline, morale, and pride in appearance were clearly apparent among pilots and operations personnel.”<sup>42</sup>

The Tacos continued their outstanding ways until they departed on 18 May, 1969. Parting laurels included those of 1Lt Gordon Denton, 188<sup>th</sup> TFS, who was one of the first pilots to win the newly established 31<sup>st</sup> TFW “Top Gun” Award in April, 1969.<sup>43</sup> Considering the competition among the five fighter squadrons, this was no small feat. Tellingly, when the Enchilada Air Force finally returned home, they had accumulated 8 Silver Stars, 29 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 26 Bronze Star Medals, 270 Air Medals, 3 Purple Hearts, the AFOUA, the Presidential Unit Citation, the Vietnamese Gallantry Cross with Palm, 3 Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses with Silver Stars, the Vietnamese Air Service Medal (Honor Class), 289 Air Force Commendation Medals and one Army Commendation Medal.<sup>44</sup>

## **FUZZY**

The 136<sup>th</sup> TFS, New York ANG, along with its parent organization, the 107<sup>th</sup> TFG, was called to active duty on 26 Jan 68.<sup>45</sup> The recall affected about 800 men,

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<sup>42</sup> 7<sup>th</sup> Air Force, Inspector General Report, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, Tuy Hoa AB, Vietnam, 27 March – 5 April 1969, History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 Jan – 31 Mar 69, Volume III – Supporting Documents, Chapters I & II.

<sup>43</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 April – 30 June 1969.

<sup>44</sup> Benolkin, Michael, “A Brief History of the 150<sup>th</sup> Fighter Group/188<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron,” online, located at <http://cybermodeler.com/history/nmang/nmang1.shtml>, downloaded 9 January 2006.

<sup>45</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 April 1968 – 30 June 1968, Volume I – Narrative and Appendices

including the support squadrons in the Group. “Top Off” training for the pilots began immediately and included three weeks at Myrtle Beach for gunnery practice, sea survival training at Homestead AFB, FL, and three weeks of “Night Owl” gunnery practice on the Avon Park range in Florida. Night Owl flights were nighttime attack sorties flown under the illumination of flares.

Unfortunately, tragedy met the 136<sup>th</sup> TFS before they ever deployed. Lt Robert Wolf and Lt Raymond Reader were killed in a mid-air collision over Lake Ontario during ACM training. Additionally, Major Richard Dye was killed coming off the “Night Owl” range when he experienced engine failure at low altitude.<sup>46</sup> Nevertheless, the men of the 136<sup>th</sup> TFS, and parts of the 107<sup>th</sup> TFG, continued preparing for their deployment to SVN.

The 136<sup>th</sup> relied on their previous deployment exercise experiences, as they had flown to Hawaii in 1965 for “Tropic Lightning” and to Alaska in 1967 for “Gold Rush.” They topped off their preparation for deployment to SEA with an ORI from 29 – 31 May, 1968, on which they scored a “satisfactory.” Consequently, the 136<sup>th</sup> received deployment orders on 3 June, 1968 to deploy to Tuy Hoa Air Base, 31<sup>st</sup> TFW, RVN, and thereby became the last ANG fighter squadron deployed to Vietnam.

While most of the 136<sup>th</sup>'s equipment departed for Tuy Hoa from 8 -11 June, 20 F-100s departed Niagara Falls on 12 June in four cells, led by their squadron commander, Lt Col Laverne J. Donner. The first 16 F-100s arrived at Tuy Hoa on 15 June, with three more on the 17<sup>th</sup>, and the last arriving on the 19<sup>th</sup>. The arrival of the bulk of the 136<sup>th</sup>'s pilots on the 15<sup>th</sup> was immediately followed, on the 17<sup>th</sup>, with theater indoctrination briefings, survival technique briefings, and intelligence and local procedures.

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<sup>46</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 April 1968 – 30 June 1968, Volume I – Narrative and Appendices

By 30 June, 1968, only 13 days after the last pilots and jets arrived, the 136<sup>th</sup> had flown 137 combat sorties and had 15 pilots in an operational ready status. By 16 July, the entire squadron was checked out for local procedures and combat operations.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, many of the personnel deployed with the 136<sup>th</sup> were sent to help out in the 31<sup>st</sup> TFW, in the areas of maintenance, supply, personnel and finance, intelligence, operations and administration.<sup>48</sup>

The 136<sup>th</sup> suffered its first combat loss on 25 July, 1968 when Captain Joseph A. L'Huillier was fatally injured after he ejected from his disabled aircraft west of Chu Lai.<sup>49</sup> Immediately after a high angle dive bomb delivery, Captain L'Huillier's aircraft was believed to have been hit by ground fire. Captain L'Huillier relayed that his aircraft controls were failing and then pulled up into a cloud deck and ejected. No one observed his ejection but his parachute was spotted on the ground a short while later. A rescue helicopter picked him up within 30 minutes but he died before he could be hospitalized. His fatal injuries were probably incurred upon ejection or landing, with improper chute opening or seat involvement suspected.

Despite their recent history of tragedy, the men of the 136<sup>th</sup> continued to fight gallantly when one their pilots, 1Lt Julius Thurn, got an unexpected crash course in the unpredictability of war. During late August, the Special Forces (SF) camp at Duc Lap came under intense and sustained attack by the enemy. The 31<sup>st</sup> TFW responded by surging aircraft and repeatedly launching alert aircraft for immediate support. One such scrambled sortie included 1Lt Thurn.

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<sup>47</sup> History – 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 July 1968 – 30 September 1968 , Volume II - Appendices

<sup>48</sup> History - 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 April 1968 – 30 June 1968, Volume I – Narrative and Appendices

<sup>49</sup> History – 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 July 1968 – 30 September 1968, Volume I – Narrative (sic)

After arriving on the scene to provide air support, the FAC briefed the target to Lt Thurn. Lt Thurn began his attack and ground fire immediately and completely disabled his aircraft and he was forced to eject in the target area.<sup>50</sup> While descending in his parachute, he was shot at by enemy soldiers, yet was not hit, and landed just outside the SF camp between the enemy and friendly positions. A Special Forces team from the camp immediately rescued Lt Thurn, escorted him into the perimeter, and promptly handed him an M-16 rifle to help defend the camp. Lt Thurn helped defend the camp for three hours until he could be evacuated by helicopter. Lt Thurn returned to Tuy Hoa with no injuries but commented that “I am the luckiest guy in Vietnam today.”<sup>51</sup>

The dangers of war continually tested the nerve of the 136<sup>th</sup> TFS. For example, on 2 August, 1968, 1Lt Michael J. Laskowski was attacking a target in the A Chau Valley and received heavy ground fire, causing heavy damage to his F-100C. He was forced to eject in mountainous terrain and was picked up by a “Jolly Green” 30 minutes later. Thankfully, Lt Laskowski received no injuries.

The same could be said for Lt Harry Roberts on December 18<sup>th</sup>.<sup>52</sup> Lt Roberts was forced to eject from his aircraft after his jet lost oil and had subsequent engine failure. He parachuted into the ocean and was picked up after spending a “very refreshing” 15 minutes in the Gulf of Tonkin. The cause of the crash was suspected enemy gun fire shortly after takeoff. Nonetheless, the 136<sup>th</sup> TFS was getting results. During their second full quarter in SVN, the squadron had 247 structures destroyed, 700 bunkers destroyed,

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<sup>50</sup> History – 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, 1 July 1968 – 30 September 1968, Volume I – Narrative (sic)

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Quarter Historical Report, 136<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 Oct 68 – 31 Dec 68, Volume II – Appendices.

22 sampans destroyed, over 100 KBA, and numerous other targets destroyed and damaged.

The pilots' heroism and skill did not go unnoticed. By the end of March, 1969, the 136<sup>th</sup> had been awarded 5 DFCs, 27 Air Medals, 4 Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses, multiple Purple Hearts and 1 AFCM. Their mission performance in all areas was "near perfect" and they delivered "their ordnance with dependable accuracy."<sup>53</sup>

Like the other ANG fighter squadrons had already ascertained, the pilots weren't the only members of the 136<sup>th</sup> to face the dangers of combat.<sup>54</sup> On 29 July, 1968, the enemy attacked the base using satchel charges and B-40 rockets, inflicting heavy damage to aircraft on the flight line. One F-100C assigned to the 136<sup>th</sup> TFS was significantly damaged and one crew chief, Sgt Gary MacDannell, in the 136<sup>th</sup> was seriously wounded during the attack.

The maintenance personnel and crews of the 136<sup>th</sup> compared favorably with those of other 31<sup>st</sup> TFW squadrons. During the July – September timeframe, they were second only to their fellow ANG friends, the 188<sup>th</sup> TFS, in having the highest percentage of combined time as "C-1" and "C-2." Additionally, in October the 136<sup>th</sup> won all three of the 31<sup>st</sup> TFW's "outstanding maintenance awards." These included the outstanding armament load crew, the outstanding flight line maintenance award and the outstanding crew chief of the month.<sup>55</sup> Lastly, during this quarter the 136<sup>th</sup> also picked up the "Hi Flyer" award for having the highest monthly flying time on one of its jets and the "White

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<sup>53</sup> History – 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 Jan – 31 Mar 69, Volume IV – Supporting Documents, Chapter III

<sup>54</sup> History – 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 July 1968 – 30 September 1968, Volume II - Appendices

<sup>55</sup> Quarter Historical Report, 136<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 Oct 68 – 31 Dec 68, Volume II – Appendices.

Broom Award” for the squadron with the best Foreign Object Debris program. Again, the 136th was the leader, in numerous areas, of the five fighter squadrons assigned to the 31<sup>st</sup> TFW.

However, the 136<sup>th</sup>'s maintenance personnel were still not done. The 136<sup>th</sup> flew the 31<sup>st</sup> TFW's 50,000<sup>th</sup> mission on 18 October, 1968. And then, in November, the 136<sup>th</sup> won the PACAF-wide award for the Outstanding Load Crew. Additionally, the other deployed members of the NY ANG who had been sent to other organizations in the 31<sup>st</sup> TFW held such key positions as Hospital Commander, the Wing Chief of Administrative Services and the First Sergeant of the Base Supply Complex, to name a few.

The last sorties flown by an Air National Guard fighter Squadron in Vietnam were flown by the 136<sup>th</sup> TFS on 20 May, 1969.<sup>56</sup> Subsequently, on the morning of 25 May, the 136<sup>th</sup>, the last Air National Guard fighter squadron in Vietnam, departed from Tuy Hoa AB. The final leg of the redeployment to Niagara Falls, on 28 May, was culminated by an 18 ship formation fly-by over the main street in Buffalo, New York, and the surrounding Niagara Falls area.

By the end of their tour in Vietnam, the 136<sup>th</sup> was credited with 1136 “structures“ destroyed, 2449 bunkers destroyed, 108 sampans destroyed, 367 confirmed KBA, plus a host of vehicles, foxholes, etc., destroyed and half again as many items listed as “damaged,” as well.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, the “professional manner displayed by both the pilots and support personnel reaffirmed to the Air Force and others the ‘ready now’ concept of the Air National Guard.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 April – 30 June 1969, 136<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, Quarterly Historical Report, 1 April -28 May 1969.

<sup>57</sup> History, 31<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing (PACAF), 1 April – 30 June 1969.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

## THE FORGOTTEN SQUADRON

The history of the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS “Fighting Falcons,” from January of 1968 until June of 1969, was unique in the annals of Air Force history. During 1968 the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS changed from a regular Air Force unit composed almost entirely of recent SEA returnees to a composite squadron consisting of approximately 50 percent ANG pilots and 80 percent ANG enlisted personnel, only to change back again by mid-1969.<sup>59</sup> A brief history is required to explain this unusual of circumstances and to highlight the resultant accolades of a largely forgotten ANG force.

On 26 January 1968, the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS was ordered to deploy as a self-sufficient F-100D/F squadron to Phu Cat AB, RVN, for a 90 day Temporary Duty (TDY) assignment. To meet this commitment, the unit was deployed as an augmented squadron consisting of 343 maintenance personnel and 23 pilots, 18 of which had completed F-100 tours in SEA. Due to Air Force policy, the 18 returnees, plus many of the enlisted personnel who had also accomplished tours in SEA, could remain TDY in SEA for only 60 days. Therefore, a significant part of the squadron would need to be replaced by the end of March, 1968. Indeed, some replacements were made at the end of March with “regular” personnel from Luke and Cannon Air Force Bases.

Further complicating the issue was the fact that on 5 April 1968 the squadron was notified that the 90-day TDY had been extended to 179 days. Additionally, the 355<sup>th</sup>'s parent Wing, the 354<sup>th</sup> TFW, had been temporarily retired pending assignment to Korea. Therefore, on 22 April 1968 the squadron was assigned to the 113<sup>th</sup> TFW, which had moved to the 355<sup>th</sup>'s “home” station of Myrtle Beach AFB, South Carolina. The 113<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, April – June 1969, Volume II, Appendix I, “Air National Guard Accomplishments with the 355<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron.”

TFW was composed of the 119<sup>th</sup> TFS, New Jersey ANG (Atlantic City), and the 121<sup>st</sup> TFS, Washington, D. C. ANG (Andrews AFB, Maryland). These two squadrons had been activated in January in response to the situation in Korea. Consequently, starting in May further SEA pilot replacements for the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS were drawn from the federalized ANG resources.

The first two ANG aircrews, both from Atlantic City, New Jersey, arrived at Phu Cat AB on 14 May, 1968. Additional ANG pilots arrived on 22 May, 20 June, 22 June, and 24 September, 1968. The combat checkout for the ANG pilots was rapid and efficient due to their vast F-100 experience, in which they averaged 1850 flight hours, 450 of which was in the F-100. For example, special flight lead waivers were given to two ANG pilots, after 10 combat missions, because of their “vast experience and superior skill.”<sup>60</sup> The ANG personnel responded to their new environment with “absolute professionalism,” and their transition was “flawlessly completed.”<sup>61</sup>

On 26 June 1968 the squadron was informed that the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS would be permanently assigned to Phu Cat and become a part of the 37<sup>th</sup> TFW on 5 July 1968. The pilots, both regular and ANG, and the enlisted personnel, all regular Air Force at this time, who had not completed a SEA tour were given the opportunity to volunteer to convert their TDY to a one year commitment in Vietnam. All 13 eligible ANG pilots volunteered to remain with the squadron for one year rather than terminate their tours at the completion of their TDY.

The enlisted personnel who could not, or did not, volunteer to stay for one year were largely replaced with ANG personnel. Therefore, by the end of December, 1968, 13

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<sup>60</sup> History of 355<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, 1 April 1968 – 30 June 1968.

<sup>61</sup> History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, April – June 1969, Volume II, Appendix I, “Air National Guard Accomplishments with the 355<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron.”

aircrews (43 percent of total) and 112 enlisted personnel (87 percent of total) of the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS were ANG personnel. Thus, of the total 162 personnel within the squadron, 125, or 77 percent, were from the ANG. However, from July to September, 1968, despite this huge turnover in personnel and a critical shortage of aircraft, the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS completely fulfilled its mission commitments and “equaled or surpassed” other units that were endowed with more aircraft and greater personnel stability.<sup>62</sup>

The squadron transitioned seamlessly and by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter of 1968 the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS had the highest aircrew qualifications in the Wing.<sup>63</sup> Over 75 percent of the pilots were qualified as flight leaders and only six were not “Night Owl” qualified as the quarter ended. The Night Owl qualification allowed a pilot to fly night attack sorties using the visibility provided by illumination flares. The squadron’s experience was put to good use as approximately 70 percent of the squadron’s 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter sorties were Close Air Support sorties while 25 sorties used a radar method of bomb delivery, called Combat Sky Spot. Most of these sorties were in northern South Vietnam, with some in Laos and North Vietnam. Additionally, the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS was assigned as the primary unit responsible for the defense of two Special Forces camps, Plateau Gi and Ba To.

The ANG pilots of the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS flew sorties in infamous locations and in support of well known operations, such as in the A Shau Valley and in the defense of the Duc Lap Special Forces Camp near the Cambodian border. Additionally, from July to September, 1968, the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS flew nearly 600 combat sorties for operations JEB STUART III, WHEELER WALLOWA, and MACARTHUR. Of course, this commitment to the mission came with a cost. On 21 July, 1968, Lt Col Sherman E.

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<sup>62</sup> History of 355<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron, July – September 1968.

<sup>63</sup> History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, July – September 1968, Volume III.

Flanagan, Jr. gave his life as one of the first recalled ANG officers to die in SEA combat. Lt Col Flanagan was shot down during a combat mission near the A Shau Valley. No ejection attempt was made and he was listed as KIA.

From October to December 1968, 92.2 percent of the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS's missions were flown in South Vietnam with most of these missions concentrated in the I and II Corps areas of South Vietnam.<sup>64</sup> Subsequently, 39.3 percent of the squadron's missions were shifted out of country to North Vietnam and Laos. The results from the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS combined reserve/regular squadron during this quarter were strong. For example, the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS had 51 confirmed KBA, 189 structures destroyed, 187 bunkers destroyed, 42 gun positions destroyed, plus a similar number of damaged targets. The accolades for their actions were quick in coming and repeated throughout their tenure.

By spring of 1969, the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS had been awarded the AFOUA, the Presidential Unit Citation, and were key contributors in the 37<sup>th</sup> TFW receipt of the SEA Outstanding Fighter Wing Award. Additionally, praise began arriving from the field. The 37<sup>th</sup> TFW received letters from TACPs and Army HQ's that extolled the "flying skill" and "abilities to place ordnance on target" of the 355<sup>th</sup>'s pilots. Others praised the "total dedication and professionalism" that "undoubtedly saved their lives."<sup>65 66</sup>

Not to be outdone, the maintenance section of the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS gained recognition by repeatedly having the lowest dud rates of the Wing and by producing 3073 effective sorties from 1 July to 31 December, 1968. The 355<sup>th</sup> set the bar high by posting an over 98 percent effective rate. By the end of March, 355<sup>th</sup> TFS ANG maintenance had

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<sup>64</sup> History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, October – December 1968, Volume II.

<sup>65</sup> Letter of Appreciation, Hqs, XXIV Corps, DASC Victor, History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, January – March 1969, Volume II.

<sup>66</sup> "Letter of Commendation for ICON 71, 72 Flight (25 September 1968), 1<sup>st</sup> Bde, 4<sup>th</sup> INF.DIV., History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, January – March 1969, Volume II.

“generated 8097 accident free flying hours” and by the end of April was competing with the other ANG unit for the Wing’s best OR rate.<sup>67</sup>

However, in accordance with a 7<sup>th</sup> AF directive, the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS was ordered to deploy to Tuy Hoa AB from 18 to 20 May, 1969.<sup>68</sup> At that time, the 355<sup>th</sup> was manned with approximately 85 percent Air National Guardsmen. Therefore, when the squadron deployed to Tuy Hoa these personnel were not eligible to make the PCS move, owing to the fact that their tours of duty were concluding. Subsequently, the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS deployed to Tuy Hoa with a handful of personnel and essentially formed a new squadron upon arrival. The ANG personnel retained at Phu Cat were returned to the United States on 27 May, 1969, for deactivation with their parent organizations.

The performance of the ANG personnel in the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS had been “truly outstanding.”<sup>69</sup> Of the ANG pilots assigned to the 355<sup>th</sup>, five volunteered to fly as F-100 FACs as part of the “Misty” program. Their subsequent contributions in that highly sensitive operation were “impressive” as evidenced by the “high success rate of the sorties under their control.”<sup>70</sup> Not insignificantly, the SEA awards of the ANG personnel in the 355<sup>th</sup> TFS included approximately 11 Silver Stars, 12 Distinguished Flying Crosses, 20 Air Medals, two Vietnamese Gallantry Crosses (with Silver Star), 16 Bronze Stars and dozens of Air Force Commendation Medals.

Just as they had joined the 355<sup>th</sup> readily and professionally, the ANG members of the 355<sup>th</sup> quietly returned to their lives after redeployment from Vietnam. Rarely in the history of the ANG had the compatibility and competence of its personnel been so

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<sup>67</sup> History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, January – March 1969, Volume III.

<sup>68</sup> History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, April – June 1969, Volume II.

<sup>69</sup> History of 37<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, April – June 1969, Volume II, Appendix I, “Air National Guard Accomplishments with the 355<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron.”

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

completely tested and so incredibly proven. The Guard members of the 355<sup>th</sup> had convincingly shown the Air Force that its Guard forces were selfless, brave, and professional warriors who deserved the admiration and respect of their active duty counterparts and their nation.

### **CONCLUSION**

It's unfortunate that in America's hasty desire to forget the pain of Vietnam, it neglected those who had given so much. Indeed, it took decades before America finally thanked, and embraced, those who served and suffered in such a far-off land. Invariably, the short attention span of a bi-polar public was sure to leave some deserving of praise without it. Unfortunately, this is largely the lot of the ANG fighter squadrons of Vietnam.

As a whole, few trumpeted their courage and successes then. Fewer still remember them now. As they are now seen for what they were, warriors and patriots who sacrificed and died for their country, let us hope that history does not continue to forget them. While the short histories of this paper give but a reflection of their accomplishments and professionalism, let us be forever mindful of the forgotten heroes of Vietnam.

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