

**High Water Flight – The Redhawk Move to High Ground
in the Flood of '96**
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Being an air installation adjacent to the mighty Columbia River can be problematic at times, if and when the river decides to rise. Portland Air Base is no stranger to the vagaries of the Columbia, and first experienced its devastating might when the river pushed through a dike on May 30, 1948. This flood, memorable for the destruction it caused to the Van-Port community of wartime-built housing in north Portland, also completely flooded Portland Air Base. Although most aircraft escaped, one non-operational 142nd Fighter Group A-26 Invader bomber (used as a utility aircraft) became an unwilling submarine for a while, until the flood waters receded.

But the Columbia and other rivers periodically threaten, as they did in December 1964 and January 1965 and have yet again since, so the base has to be ready to adapt to Mother Nature as required. And this was the case 15 years ago, in February 1996, when quickly rising waters resulted in an urgent evacuation of aircraft, personnel and equipment from the base.

A Hundred Year Flood

In early February 1996, a rare series of weather events occurring in a short period of time culminated in catastrophic flooding in the region, especially the Willamette Valley. Rains saturated the soil. Cold temperatures froze the soil and increased icing. Heavy snowfall suddenly filled the snowpack above normal levels. This was followed by a warm, humid air mass from a strong subtropical jet stream which reached Oregon on February 6, raised the freezing level. This then melted the abundant snowpack and pushed 10-inches of water downhill in 48 hours, accompanied by even more rains. It was a recipe for misery, and as the rivers in the region quickly swelled several people died, hundreds of homes were destroyed and thousands of people had to find shelter. Over a billion dollars of damage resulted.

Even more damage could have taken place. On February 8 local authorities became alarmed as the Columbia rose, and warned that a surging Columbia River could break through a weakened dike and flood the airport area in just minutes.

For the 142nd Fighter Wing, the rising waters heeded a quick response and posed a dual challenge. One was to preserve the ability of the unit to perform its mission of air defense and ASA, especially as the 142nd was at the time, and still is, the only air defense/Air Sovereignty Alert (ASA)-dedicated unit in the entire Pacific Northwest. The other challenge was preservation of mission-critical resources from calamitous flood, to include the unit's F-15 Eagle fighters and many vital spare parts and equipment required for the maintenance and servicing of the wing's aircraft

Maintaining Alert Posture

To deal with the first challenge, as the wing prepared to evacuate, Western Air Defense Sector (WADS), headquartered at McChord AFB, Washington, made the decision to ensure the integrity of the Pacific Northwest's air defense and ordered Portland's alert aircraft and other flyable fighters to reposition to McChord. So on February 8 the wing flew 13 F-15s up to McChord where they commenced alert operations within two hours.

Fortunately, the Redhawk fighters found a ready home at the former air defense alert facilities that Portland had used at the end of the Cold War, known then as the 142nd's Detachment 1. Washington Air National Guard personnel maintained the alert barn and fighter ramp for training and contingency purposes. Despite a major mobility exercise taking place at McChord during this flood time the Washington Air Guard caretakers rapidly prepared the alert facilities to receive the Redhawks.

The situation was further complicated as Redhawk ground crews that tried to drive up from Portland to McChord were turned back by flooding on Interstate-5. The Oregon Guardsmen then obtained air transport to get up to McChord, while WADS emergency action personnel filled in the gap in a great demonstration of professionalism and teamwork. For six days the Redhawks maintained alert status at McChord, until their return to Portland on February 13, where they promptly resumed standing alert.

Preserving Assets

As for the second challenge, the wing sent five other non-operational F-15s undergoing maintenance to high ground. Civil engineers cleared the evacuation route by trimming trees along Portland roads and lifting powerlines. The aircraft were then towed from the base to the parking lot at the Colwood National Golf Course, where the Guardsmen humorously established 142nd Detachment 2 at the "Colwood Air National Guard Base." They were joined there by three HH-60G helicopters of the Portland-based Air Force Reserve's 304th Rescue Squadron as well as a host of ground support equipment. An improvised parking sign for Planes, Trains and Automobiles directed the planes to the golf course parking lot, the trains to the rail line across the street, and the automobiles to Columbia Boulevard. In addition to the new "Det 2," more than \$200 million worth of other vital equipment was moved to a giant warehouse made available by the Hoffman Corporation. By Valentines Day, 1996, all the locally deployed assets were returned to the base, safe and ready to continue on with the mission.

Mission Successful

As a result of the hard work and creativity of the wing, the 142FW successfully relocated on short notice while ensuring continuity in mission capability and preservation of vital assets and resources. Even though the Columbia did not break through and flood the base as it did in 1948, perhaps Mother Nature held off just that time in response to Redhawk readiness. And the Redhawks of the Oregon Air National Guard remain just as ready today, providing 24/7 air sovereignty alert for the Pacific Northwest.

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