

## **NEW LIFE AS THE 50TH SPACE WING**

Air Force officials soon reversed their decision to inactivate the 50th. On January 30, 1992, Air Force Space Command activated the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing as the 50th Space Wing, at Falcon Air Force Base, east of Colorado Springs, Colorado. At the same time, the command activated the 50th Operations Group, the redesignated World War II, and early Cold War-era 50th Fighter Group, and assigned it to the 50th Space Wing. Air Force Space Command also activated the 50th Maintenance and Supply Group and the 50th Combat Support Group under new names, creating a wing organization that very closely resembled that of the 1950s. Air Force Chief of Staff, General Merrill A. McPeak, implemented this return to the wing-group-squadron structure throughout the Air Force to clarify command relationships and realign administrative duties to the proper organizational level.

Squadrons assigned to the wing concurrent with its activation included a mixture of the wing's past units and those previously assigned to the 2d Space Wing, which the 50th replaced at Falcon Air Force Base. The command activated the 50th Mission Support, Civil Engineering, Security Police, Communications, Airdrome, Air Service, Depot Repair, and Depot Supply Squadrons with new designations. Transferred from the 2d Space Wing were the 1st, 2d, 3d, and 5th Satellite Control Squadrons, renamed Space Operations Squadrons. Headquarters, 2d Satellite Tracking Group became Headquarters, 750th Space Group, and transferred to the 50th Space Wing. The 50th Space Wing also assumed responsibility for a number of detachments operating around the world.

Within months of its activation, the wing completed its reorganization under the objective wing structure that had been ordered by General McPeak to streamline organizations and to clarify lines of command. The objective organizational structure replaced former deputy commander staff elements with line organization groups to which squadrons were assigned. Much of the preliminary groundwork for this return to the "wing-group-squadron" structure had already been completed concurrent with the wing's activation. As such, the primary operational and support groups had been identified, activated, and assigned commanders. Still, many functions and squadrons,

especially in the support areas, relied on Peterson Air Force Base organizations, about 12 miles west of Falcon. As the wing matured over the first year of activity, its commanders determined that the units at Falcon Air Force Base could be served better by wing-owned agencies. The 50th Space Wing soon gained its own Military Personnel Flight and Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Office, decreasing its reliance on Peterson Air Force Base's 21st Space Wing.

Organizational changes continued throughout the first four years of the wing's tenure as the Air Force Space Command and its subordinate units matured. This evolutionary process, and additional Air Force-wide restructuring and redefining of roles and responsibilities, led to unit activations, inactivations, and redesignations. So too, did the expanding role of the 50th Space Wing in satellite control. Changes such as these, a regular part of the wing's past for nearly 40 years, continued as the 50th Space Wing found itself reporting to a new headquarters on July 1, 1993. The expansion of the Air Force Space Command's mission and organizational standardization led to the activation of the Fourteenth Air Force at Vandenberg Air Force Base, California on that date. The command's space launch, surveillance, warning, and control wings were reassigned to the numbered air force following its activation. The addition of the Military Strategic and Tactical Relay (Milstar) communications satellites to the Department of Defense's space systems resulted in the activation of the 50th Operations Group's 4th Space Operations Squadron in April 1994.

No longer did the wing's crews strap into ejector seats, hit the afterburners, and launch into the wild blue yonder. The 50th Space Wing's crews "flew" satellites in the deep black of space, again assuming a leading role in the application of advancing technology. The leap into space was a natural act for the unit that had been at the forefront in fielding and operating technologically advanced fighters in United States Air Forces Europe.

As the 50th Space Wing, the organization assumed command and control responsibilities for several existing satellite constellations that provided a variety of critical information to the Air Force, Department of Defense, and other users. Additionally, the 50th assumed responsibility for the Air Force Satellite Control Network (AFSCN), which enabled satellite controllers to "fly" satellites under their command.

Crews of the wing's space operations squadrons, clad in Air Force blue flight suits, monitored satellites during launch operations, "flew" the satellites to their proper orbits, operated the craft while in orbit, and fixed those satellite anomalies repairable from ground control stations as they occurred. Controlling the satellites included such tasks as conducting telemetry, tracking, and commanding functions, monitoring the health of the vehicles, and performing station-keeping and other required maneuvers. Crews of the wing's 50th Operations Group and 750th Space Group conducted these operations.

Immediately after its activation, the wing entered an arena well known to those who had served previously with the unit—that of excellence. In February 1992, the 3d Space Operations Squadron received Air Force Space Command's Space Support Trophy for its "superior achievement, outstanding mission performance, and professionalism." As it had in its many years at Hahn Air Base, the 50th continued to achieve levels to which other units could aspire. In April 1992, crews of the Colorado Tracking Station broke an exiting Air Force record when they logged their 439th day of satellite support operations without a personnel error. By September 30, the day their streak ended, the station had logged more than 15,000 satellite supports without a personnel error. This achievement led to the station's second consecutive Operational Excellence Award.

By year's end, the wing had demonstrated that its lack of aircraft did not limit its contribution to contingency operations. In fact, its satellite control mission virtually guaranteed the wing's involvement at some point. In November 1992, crews of the 3d Space Operations Squadron flew a Navy Fleet Satellite Communications (FLTSAT) craft from an orbit above the Pacific Ocean to one above the Atlantic. The flight, covering 162 degrees of longitude was the longest in the squadron's history. Then, on December 4, 1992, crews of the 3d Space Operations Squadron realigned a Defense Satellite Communications System craft from its European coverage area to provide needed communications for Operation RESTORE HOPE. The unit activated a second antenna of the same satellite to compensate for some of the lost capability in Europe. These activities, and those of the wing's other units, led to the wing's receipt of the Herres Award recognizing the US Space Command wing that made most effective use of its assigned resources.

Despite defense reductions of the early 1990s, the 50th Space Wing continued to demonstrate its capabilities and its commitment to public service. After wild fires ravaged large areas around Oakland, California, the wing's 750th Communications Squadron deployed 37 of its Onizuka-based personnel to support relief efforts.

Since its activation, the wing's responsibilities have expanded as new satellite systems entered service, became operational, and transferred to any one of the wing's space operations squadrons for command and control. By 1994, the 50th Space Wing managed the 24-satellite Global Positioning System. The Global Positioning System constellation provided military and many other government agencies, as well as private and commercial users, with nearly precise location (to within 16 meters) in latitude, longitude, and altitude. Crews of the 50th Space Wing's 4th Space Operations Squadron accepted command authority for the Military Strategic and Tactical Relay communications system on November 1, 1994. The wing also assumed control of satellites in the Defense Support Program, the Defense Meteorological Satellite Program, in addition to supporting the satellite control needs of other military and government agencies.

In June 1997, the 50th Space Wing began realignment actions under the Base Realignment and Closure Commission recommendations approved by Congress and the President in 1995. These actions called for a reduction in military presence at Onizuka Air Station, Sunnyvale, California; Fairchild AFB, Washington; and Offutt AFB, Nebraska. The first actions included realigning the remote tracking stations to the 22d Space Operations Squadron. Soon after the wing inactivated the 750th Operations Support Squadron and 750th Logistics Support Squadron.

Additional realignment actions included closing the Defense Meteorological Satellite Program (DMSP) space operations center (SOC) at Fairchild AFB. After the unit closed, the Air Force shipped the equipment to Suitland Maryland, where the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) planned to establish their SOC for controlling the DMSP satellites. Under a presidential initiative, the Air Force would relinquish control of the satellites to NOAA by 1998. NOAA would then operate the satellites supported by an Air Force Reserve squadron stationed at Falcon AFB. As measures taken at Fairchild concluded, the 50th Space Wing worked towards the

closure of the DMSP SOC at Offutt AFB. Through late 1997 and early 1998, the wing worked towards the transfer of the DMSP mission to NOAA and the activation of the reserve unit at Falcon. When the 50th Space Wing ceased operations at Offutt in June 1998, the equipment transferred to Schriever AFB (formerly Falcon) where the 8th Space Operations Squadron began installation of the equipment to operate as NOAA's back-up operations center for DMSP. In September 1998, the unit began its first operations at Schriever.

In the fall of 1998, the wing retired one satellite system and gained responsibilities for another. On October 21, 1998, the 5th Space Operations Squadron placed the last Defense Satellite Communications Satellite II into a deep orbit. The DSCS II satellite had exceeded the limits of its life expectancy and had to be replaced with a newer communication satellite. No longer a part of the wing's inventory, the DSCS II was transferred to a commercial satellite research firm for study. In December 1998, the wing began support of the Midcourse Space Experiment satellite.

It was also in November 1998, that the wing stood as the vanguard organization in the forefront of space defense when the wing became the primary Air Force Space Command organization monitoring the Leonids meteor shower. This galactic phenomenon, during which the Earth passed through the debris field of the comet Temple-Tuttle, occurred every 32 years. During the five-day event, the wing collected and disseminated data on the number of particles affecting the DOD's, civil, and commercial orbital areas.

The new millennium brought with it new challenges and new threats. Continuing activity resulting from the 1995 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission report resulted in the inactivation of the 750th Space Group and the 5th Space Operations Squadron at Onizuka Air Force Station in 1999 and 2000, respectively. The inactivation of other agencies and units at Onizuka AFS left the 21st Space Operations Squadron as the installation's host and the 21 SOPS commander assumed installation commander responsibilities.

On September 11, 2001, the terrorist organization Al Qaeda launched an attack against the United States. Using hijacked commercial airliners as missiles, Al Qaeda operatives flew three aircraft into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. A

fourth hijacked airliner crashed in a field in Pennsylvania after passengers challenged the hijackers and attempted to regain control of the aircraft.

In response to the attacks, which killed 2,976 people, the United States initiated Operation ENDURING FREEDOM on October 7, 2001, supported by British forces and the anti-Taliban Afghanistan Northern Alliance. On that date, U.S. forces attacked Al Qaeda and Taliban forces in Afghanistan, quickly driving the terrorists and their militant supporters from power. The 50th supported, and continued to support, United States, British, and by 2006 NATO operations in Afghanistan with satellite communications, GPS enhancements, and deployed personnel. By 2005, the 50th averaged 80 persons per month deployed to forward operating bases supporting the Global War on Terrorism and Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.

Afghanistan would not be the only front in the war against terrorism. Operation ENDURING FREEDOM included operations in the Philippines supporting the Philippine government in its actions against the terrorist organizations Abu Sayeff and Jemaah Islamiyah, and other terrorist organizations in the Horn of Africa. Iraq, meanwhile, saw the United States' operations against the Taliban and Al Qaeda as an opportunity to take advantage of the situation. Saddam Hussein's military forces continued to engage U.S. air patrols over the northern and southern Iraqi no-fly zones established at the end of DESERT STORM. His government failed to comply fully with 16 United Nations resolutions calling for full disclosure of his weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, chemical, and biological) programs and international inspection of all facilities.

On March 20, 2003, United States forces initiated Operation IRAQI FREEDOM by leading a coalition of British, Polish, and other countries' military units to remove Hussein from power and arrest him. As they had in 1991, coalition forces moved swiftly to defeat Iraqi forces and Republican Guard units, capturing Baghdad on April 9, 2003. Again, the 50th Space Wing played a key role. Crews of the 2d Space Operations Squadron developed new techniques for enhancing Global Positioning System accuracy over the Iraqi theater of operations and flew over 1,000 satellite sorties between 20 March and 10 April 2003. Satellite crews of the 3d and 4th Space Operations Squadrons maximized satellite communications coverage of the theater, while the 1st Space Operations Squadron set a record, placing a GPS satellite in orbit

and completing all early on-orbit checkout activities in only 11 days, while also flying 100 Defense Support Program satellite sorties and 300 GPS sorties in the first 20 days of combat. The 3d Space Operations Squadron's Defense Satellite Communications System Block III satellites provided 80 percent of in-theater bandwidth. Meanwhile, the 4th Space Operations Squadron dedicated 85 percent of MILSTAR communications capability to the war effort, flying 14,000 sorties in the first 20 days of operations.

The crews of the 50th Network Operations Group (previously 50th Communications Group) supported all of the wing's satellite command and control activities through the Air Force Satellite Control Network scheduling nodes managed by the 22d Space Operations Squadron. Personnel at the wing's remote tracking stations, including 21st and 23d Space Operations Squadrons, logged over 12,312 satellite contacts while also assisting with other satellite operations and 3 satellite launches.

The 50th also underwent organizational changes in the first years of the new century. To correct inefficiencies and realign organizations along mission lines, Air Force Space Command ordered the redesignation the 50th Communications Group as the 50th Network Operations Group and reassigned the 21st, 22d, and 23d Space Operations Squadrons to that organization. Functions of the 850th Space Communications Squadron merged with those of the 50th Space Communications Squadron and the 850th inactivated in January 2006.

The 50th Space Wing ended 2005 preparing to implement actions directed by the 2005 Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission. The commission's recommendations called for the transfer of some mission functions of the 21st Space Operations Squadron mission to 50th Space Wing units at Vandenberg AFB, California, and the closure of Onizuka Air Force Station. The mission transfer would occur over the next several years, following the construction of needed facilities at Vandenberg AFB. Onizuka Air Force Station was scheduled to close by 2011.