

Remembering the Air Guard in Vietnam

“We’d had some support with F-100s from the Regulars, but they wouldn’t come in as close ... I had never seen air support that close and accurate!”

-Capt. Terry Van Meter, 25th Infantry Division, August 1968



The first F-100s of the 174th Tactical Fighter Squadron land at Phu Cat Air Base at the start of their deployment to Vietnam. Photo courtesy of the National Guard Education Foundation.

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The attack mentioned above, which destroyed enemy bunkers along a riverbank, was staged by fighter-bombers flown by members of the 120th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) from the Colorado Air National Guard. Like most people at the time and persisting to this day, the captain believed until that strike that no National Guard units had served in Vietnam.

In fact, the 120th was one of four Air Guard TFS (plus 85 percent of a fifth) that served in-country in 1968-69. Their story started 40 years ago this month, not directly because of the war in Vietnam, but rather in the wake of the North Korean seizure of the American Navy spy ship USS Pueblo on Jan. 23, 1968.

America was deeply involved in the Vietnam War and now feared a renewed outbreak of fighting in Korea, where an armistice had ended combat, but not the war, in 1953.

To prepare for possible conflict, President Lyndon Johnson authorized the mobilization of 11 Air Guard wings (Army Guard units would not be mobilized until May 1968). With only a reporting date of Jan. 27, they were on active duty for two days when the Tet Offensive erupted across Vietnam. Renewed hostilities with North Korea never developed and it soon became obvious that the ANG was needed in Vietnam.

At the time, a typical ANG organization had one flying squadron plus all of the support units necessary to keep its aircraft maintained and its pilots prepared to fly. Once each of the wings was mobilized, they were often broken up with their flying squadron going off to a foreign assignment where support units already existed from other U.S. Air Force assets. Though some ground crewmembers from each squadron would accompany the squadron overseas, this left most of their support personnel available for reassignment as individuals or as small cells to be used world-wide by the USAF. Many in this capacity served in South Korea. So many in fact, that in late 1968-early 1969 the Air Guard accounted for 60 percent of all USAF strength in Korea.

Of the eleven ANG wings mobilized in January, eight contained fighter squadrons armed with North American F-100C Super Sabre fighter-bombers. While the F-100 could engage in limited air-to-air combat, its real strength was as a close air support platform to destroy enemy formations and installations on the ground. Fully loaded, these aircraft could carry 500-pound, air-to-ground missiles, napalm and machine guns for strafing.

The other three mobilized ANG wings each flew RF-101 “Voodoo” aerial reconnaissance aircraft. These employed a variety of high speed cameras that took photos from different angles to give analysts a 3-D look at the target area. During their time on active duty, all three squadrons from these wings were assigned to Arkansas’s 123rd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing. Once they completed post-mobilization training, each squadron would, on a rotational basis, serve in one of three assignments for up to 90 days before being transferred to the next duty station. Their assignments were in Panama, Alaska and Japan. This latter assignment often found them flying along the Demilitarized Zone with North Korea, taking pictures inside that communist state.

The four TFS’s assigned to Vietnam began their long deployment flights. The pilots of each squadron flew their F-100C’s over the Pacific, spending many hours over open water. They each had to perform 10, mid-air refu-

elings along the way. Those support personnel still assigned to their squadrons arrived by military transport and linked up at their assigned base.

The first ANG unit to arrive in Vietnam was Colorado’s 120th TFS, which arrived at Phan Rang Air Base on May 3, 1968. Two days after arriving it began combat operations, which continued until it returned home in April 1969. Over its



Photo courtesy of the National Guard Education Foundation

Maj. Gerald McGowan, flight surgeon of Iowa’s 174th Tactical Fighter Squadron, treats a Vietnamese baby at the Kim Chau Orphanage near Phu Cat Air Base. He is being observed by Capt. Joseph Kennedy, the base chaplain. Many members of the squadron volunteered their free time to help treat, play with and educate the children.

one-year tour, the 120th would fly over 5,000 sorties (including the one recounted above) and lose two pilot’s killed in action.

The second ANG squadron to arrive, on May 17, was Iowa’s 174th TFS, which was assigned to Phu Cat Air Base. Due to a shortage of support personnel at Phu Cat, Iowa’s 185th Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron accompanied the 174th, making a total of 376 Iowa Airmen serving at this base. When not engaged in combat operations, members of this unit took a great interest in the children in a nearby orphanage. They helped them with everything from medical care to getting families back home, to sending toys, clothes and other items to improve the children’s lives. But the war went on and the 174th had one pilot killed in action. The Iowa Airmen remained in Vietnam until May 1968.

The third and fourth Air Guard TFS’s to arrive in Vietnam were the only Guard units, Air or Army, to serve together in the war. New Mexico’s 188th TFS arrived at Tuy Hoa Air Base on June 7. It was joined by New York’s 136th

TFS a few days later. Both squadrons were assigned to the USAF’s 31st Tactical Fighter Wing. They flew the same type of ground support missions as their fellow Guardsmen in the 120th and 174th. During the course of its one year tour, the 188th lost three pilots killed in action. Fortunately, New York’s 136th suffered no combat losses. Both units received high praise from the USAF for their mission effectiveness. In fact, following a combat strike near the Cambodian border on an enemy bunker complex, the bomb damage assessment team credited the 136th with “100 percent ordnance on target with 90 percent effectiveness.” Both units returned home in June 1969.

There was one other fighter squadron with an Air Guard connection, often referred to as the “fifth” ANG squadron to serve in Vietnam. The USAF organized the 355th TFS in South Carolina in 1968. While about 15 percent of its personnel were USAF members, 85 percent of its men were volunteers drawn from the 119th TFS (New Jersey ANG) and 121st TFS (D.C. ANG). These two squadrons were part of the January mobilization and served as a source for much of the 355th’s ground support personnel as well. The 355th deployed to Vietnam in the summer of 1968. One Guard pilot was killed in action. Though the unit remained in Vietnam into 1970, its Guardmembers were rotated home in the summer of 1969. No campaign credit is given to either ANG unit for this deployment.

While the war raged in Vietnam, tensions were still quite high in the Korean Peninsula. To help forestall a North Korean attack, two ANG fighter squadrons were deployed to South Korea just in case of conflict. They were Kansas’s 127th TFS and Ohio’s 166th TFS. They also flew the F-100C to give close ground support if needed. Seeing no combat, they returned home in June 1969.

The war in Vietnam had one other affect on the Air Guard, a second partial mobilization on May 13, 1968. This was brought about by the strain on the USAF commitments world wide and the need for additional personnel. This mobilization consisted of only three units, the 104th TFS (Maryland), 138th TFS (New York) and the 147th Aeromedical Airlift Squadron (Pennsylvania). All three units remained in the United States, though some of their personnel were assigned overseas, and all were released from active duty by the end of 1968.

In all, 10,511 ANG personnel were mobilized in the two call ups; with about 2,000 serving in Vietnam, of those seven were killed in action. Approximately 4,000 additional personnel served in Korea or Japan. The Air Guard played a small but effective role in the war. In fact, Van Meter credits that air strike by the 120th in August 1968 for saving the lives of some of his Soldiers. Who knows how many other lives were affected by their service and sacrifice.

Editor’s note: The ANG Strategic Airlifters began flying missions to Southeast Asia in December 1965 on a volunteer basis.

Between July 1970 and January 1971, Airmen from Pennsylvania’s 193rd Tactical Electronic Warfare Squadron and two of their EC-121 aircraft served in Thailand supporting the USAF in “Operation Command Buzz.” They operated flying radar platforms and airborne control centers for U.S. tactical air operations over North Vietnam and the Gulf of Tonkin.