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The Air Defense Mission

Operation Noble Eagle

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by Tech. Sgt. Mark Kinkade

It was the day the screens went black.

Sept. 11, 2001, was the day that breathed life into what some considered a "sunset mission." It was the day when everything changed. In the hours before the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, D.C., 1st Air Force and the Continental United States North American Aerospace Defense Command Region were in an exercise. The combined air operations center at Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla., and its three air defense sector headquarters around the country were on a simulated full-scale alert. At Tyndall, the small room housing rows of radar screens beeped to life as people filed in for what was shaping up to be a typical exercise with a handful of long days and longer nights.



A1C Melvin Casler, a tracking technician with Elmendorf's 611th Air Control Squadron, helps monitor 1.3 million miles of Alaskan airspace as part of Noble Eagles air superiority mission over the northern frontier.

Official USAF Photo

Within three hours, the busy air defense control centers in Florida, New York and Washington state went strangely silent as people listened to reports about what was happening in New York and Washington, D.C. The radar screens showing aircraft transiting U.S. airspace slowly went black as 1st Air Force and the Federal Aviation Administration grounded all aircraft and put up a virtual brick wall around the nation.

"It was eerie," said Tech. Sgt. Christie Watson, an air surveillance technician on duty at Tyndall's Southeast Air Defense Sector that day. "The screen was black, like it was broken. Until then, life here was pretty routine."

Before 2001, 1st Air Force was charged with keeping an eye on the nation's borders, usually looking for threats in the form of Russian aircraft skirting too close for comfort to the mainland. In those few hours, the command's mission went from looking outward to looking inward. Now 1st Air Force — with the assistance of Canadian partners, other services, multiple federal agencies and an intricate web of control centers and defense sectors throughout the United States — watches the nation's skies for the threat from within. Operation Noble Eagle was born.

A new charter

In the weeks before the attacks, the future of 1st Air Force was grim. Some Pentagon officials believed the command had outlived its usefulness, that the Cold War mission of defending the nation's borders from air attack could be handed to other Air Force units. The days of watching America's skies may have been numbered, said Maj. Gen. Craig McKinley, 1st Air Force commander and commander of the Continental U.S. NORAD Region, all headquartered at Tyndall.

"(During the Cold War, the United States) was balancing against the threat," he said. "(Without) a strategic outside threat, we had 'built down' as the Air Force reorganized to an active duty posture capable of dealing with any traditional threats. But terrorism doesn't follow the rules of conventional warfare. The opening salvo of the war wasn't traditional, and there's not going to be an armistice. We had to change our way of thinking to deal with the threat."

Changing the way of thinking started almost immediately. Within minutes of the attacks, fighter aircraft under NORAD control were airborne over key cities, and kept a near-constant sortie pace for almost six months. They flew more than 19,000 sorties, and since the attacks have racked up more than 34,000 sorties supporting Noble Eagle. In 2000, by contrast, the NORAD air defense mission logged only 147 sorties. National Guard fighter units made up the backbone of what would eventually become a large network of surveillance, support and war fighting

aircraft flying Noble Eagle missions.

Operation Noble Eagle is part of the overall plan to protect North America from airborne attack. Under the auspices of NORAD, 1st Air Force supports the defense plan by organizing, equipping and operating the air defense forces. NORAD, a bi-national command of U.S. and Canadian forces headquartered at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., keeps an eye out for missiles and other non-aircraft related issues. The combined air operations center at Tyndall acts as a "battlefield" headquarters for the entire continental United States airspace. Three subordinate air sectors handle various regions of the country — Tyndall's Southeast Air Defense Sector, the Northeast Air Defense Sector at Rome, N.Y., and the Western Air Defense Sector at McChord Air Force Base, Wash.

At any given time, Noble Eagle aircraft may be flying air patrol missions over more than 15 U.S. cities, the general said. Also, special security events like the Super Bowl usually warrant air protection. But the fighters aren't the first line of defense. The defense of the nation's skies begins in a dark room in Florida.

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The 'scope dopes'

For Lt. Col. David Cronk, things are a lot more serious than they used to be. A little less than three years ago, his main role as crew commander in the Southeast Air Defense Sector control room was to identify a handful of green blips floating around on a computer-generated image of the U.S. coastline on a radar screen manufactured in the late 1960s. Now, he and his crew of air surveillance technicians have to identify hundreds of green blips and figure out if any of them might soon become a terrorist's weapon.

"You never know what might be going on," he said. "It's really a matter of trying to take the latest intelligence and applying it to what we see, and trying to project what might happen."

The surveillance technicians — nicknamed "scope dopes" by everyone outside the defense sector control room doors — spend countless hours watching the blips move across the map. Each blip represents an aircraft, or a possible aircraft. And each needs to be identified.

Identification starts with the FAA, which still has primary responsibility for commercial air traffic in the United States. However, the war on terrorism triggered a newfound sense of urgency for the Pentagon and other government agencies to lash up their capabilities to provide a credible air defense shield for America.

Now FAA representatives not only sit in the combined air operations center at Tyndall, but also at all the air defense sectors. Since Noble Eagle is considered a second front in the war on terrorism, the FAA reps are part of the commander's battle staff and help identify aircraft that may behave erratically.

Working furiously over the sea of blips, the technicians isolate possible "questionable" targets based on information they have obtained from intelligence sources, the FAA or other agencies. For example, if a person acting suspiciously boards an aircraft in Atlanta, the agencies ask the air defense sector to keep an eye on the aircraft.

The technicians track the aircraft on its flight plan and watch for any deviations. If the aircraft deviates from the flight plan, or if the agencies or the defense sector have reason to believe the aircraft is a threat, then the defense sector notifies the command center, which then decides if military aircraft should be scrambled to intercept, tail or simply check out the commercial airliner.

The technician's job can be both boring and tense, said Staff Sgt. Toni Owens, a technician in the southeast sector control center.

"It takes a lot of patience, a little detective work and attention to detail," she said. "But it helps knowing I'm helping protect my family, my friends and my nation."

Guard on guard

The bulk of the Noble Eagle mission falls to the Air National Guard, said Canadian Brig. Gen. Charles Bouchard,

Continental U.S. NORAD Region's commander. Since Oct. 1997, the Guard has staffed 1st Air Force command and control facilities and executed all phases of the air sovereignty mission.

Within 18 hours of the Sept. 11 attacks, the number of aircraft assigned air defense duties went from 14 jets on alert to more than 400, and active duty and reserve units became part of the continental air defense.

The aircraft used span the spectrum of the Air Force inventory. Fighter jets provide escort, tail aircraft and act as interceptors. Tanker aircraft refuel the jets. Cargo aircraft carry supplies when needed for units "deploying" to support Noble Eagle. There's even talk of using unmanned reconnaissance vehicles to watch the borders.

"The truly amazing thing," the general said, "is they are predominantly Guard units. It's a true display of patriotism and professionalism."

Motivation remembered

The tight lid Noble Eagle places on the airspace above North America is comforting, but General McKinley still has nights where he loses sleep. After all, this is a war, the skies over the United States are a war zone and the threat is always out there.

"What keeps me awake is trying to figure out our vulnerabilities," the general said. "Where can the next attack come from? How? When and where do I need to position our forces? Sept. 11 proved we don't really know what may happen, but we have to figure out a way to be ready."

Since most of the people in 1st Air Force are Guardsmen, they've been on duty at Tyndall and around the country long before Sept. 11. Most of them have stories to tell about the day when everything changed. Most of them were doing what they do now, but with a different sense of purpose.

Now, Sept. 11 is their motivation.

"We can't let it happen again," Sergeant Watson said. "That was our wake-up call, and you usually only get one. When I'm at work and things are getting a little routine, I remember the day when those screens were dark because the aircraft weren't flying. That's motivation."

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