



Fact Sheet

United States Air Force

15th AIRLIFT WING (PACAF)

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15TH AIRLIFT WING HISTORY & MISSION

The 15th Airlift Wing, originally constituted as the 15th Pursuit Group (Fighter) on Nov. 22, 1940, activated at Wheeler Field, Hawaii, on Dec. 1, 1940. A little more than a year later, on Dec. 7, 1941, it engaged in combat action during the Japanese attack on military installations in Hawaii.

Bombing and strafing attacks that morning by carrier-based planes of the Japanese strike force destroyed many assigned aircraft and caused heavy casualties; however, 12 of the group's pilots succeeded in launching their P-36 and P-40 aircraft from Wheeler and Haleiwa Fields, flew a total of 16 sorties, and destroyed 10 enemy planes. Second Lieutenants George S. Welch and Kenneth M. Taylor, P-40 pilots assigned to the 47th Pursuit Squadron, shot down four and two, respectively, and were later cited for extraordinary heroism during the attack. Both received the Distinguished Service Cross.

With the outbreak of war, the group's primary mission remained the aerial defense of the Hawaiian Islands; but training pilots for combat became its secondary task. On Feb. 12, 1942, the unit was redesignated the 15th Pursuit Group (Interceptor). Several months later, the archaic "pursuit group" term was dropped and the unit was redesignated the 15th Fighter Group on May 15, 1942. That summer, the group's mission changed. Although defense of the islands continued to be an important responsibility, providing combat training for pilots became the primary mission for the next two years.

In 1943, the group sent squadrons to the Central and South Pacific for operations against Japanese forces. Then, in April 1944, all elements of the 15th Fighter Group returned to Hawaii and began training for very-long-range (VLR) bomber escort missions, obtaining North American P-51 Mustangs later in the year. Aircraft flown prior to that time included the Curtiss A-12 Shrike, Grumman OA-9 amphibious observation plane, Martin B-12 amphibious bomber, Boeing P-26, Curtiss P-36 Hawk, Bell P-39 Airacobra, Curtiss P-40 Warhawk, and the Republic P-47D Thunderbolt.

In January 1945, ordered into combat, the group left Hawaii for Saipan in the Marianas Islands, remaining there until a landing strip could be secured by the Marines on Iwo Jima. The first fighter aircraft to arrive at Iwo Jima were P-51s of the 15th's 47th Fighter Squadron the morning of March 6, with the 45th and 78th Squadrons following the next day. They supported Marine ground units by bombing and strafing cave entrances, trenches, troop concentrations, and storage

areas. By the middle of March, the group also began strikes against enemy airfields, shipping, and military installations in the Bonin Islands.

On April 7, 1945, the 15th flew its first VLR mission to Japan, providing fighter escort for the B-29 bombers that attacked the Nakajima aircraft plant near Tokyo, and was awarded the Distinguished Unit Citation. In late April and early May that year, the 15th struck Japanese airfields on Kyushu to curtail the enemy's suicide attacks against the invasion force on Okinawa and also hit enemy troop trains, small factories, gun positions, and hangars in the Bonins and Japan.

During the summer of 1945, the 15th Fighter Group was assigned to the Twentieth Air Force and continued its fighter sweeps against Japanese airfields and other targets, in addition to flying long-range B-29 escort missions to Japanese cities, until the end of the war. After the war, the group remained on Iwo Jima until Nov. 25, 1945, when it transferred (without personnel and equipment) to Bellows Field, Hawaii. There it absorbed the personnel and equipment of the 508th Fighter Group. On Feb. 8, 1946, the unit moved to Wheeler Field, where it remained until inactivated on Oct. 15, 1946.

Nine years later, on June 20, 1955, the unit was redesignated the 15th Fighter Group (Air Defense) and assigned to the Air Defense Command. It activated at Niagara Falls Municipal Airport, New York, on Aug. 18, 1955, and participated in the air defense of the eastern United States until inactivated again on July 1, 1960.

On April 17, 1962, the organization activated as the 15th Tactical Fighter Wing assigned to the Tactical Air Command and was organized at MacDill AFB, Florida, on July 1, 1962. The wing conducted tactical fighter combat crew training and participated in exercises, operations, and readiness tests.

At the time of the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, the 15th reorganized as a mission-capable unit, returning afterward to its training mission. In 1965, the wing deployed its 43rd, 45th, 46th and 47th Tactical Fighter Squadrons to Southeast Asia, where they participated in the air defense commitment for the Philippines from Clark AB and flew combat missions from Cam Ranh Bay Air Base in South Vietnam and Ubon Royal Thai AFB in Thailand. Members of the 45th TFS achieved the first U.S. Air Force aerial victories of the Vietnam conflict when they destroyed two MIGs on July 10, 1965.

Captains Thomas S. Roberts, Ronald C. Anderson, Kenneth E. Holcombe, and Arthur C. Clark received credit for these kills. In 1968, the 15th TFW began B-57 light bomber aircrew training. During the USS Pueblo crisis that year, the wing deployed sixteen F-4s to Seymour-Johnson AFB, North Carolina. On Oct. 1, 1970, the wing inactivated at MacDill AFB.

One year later, on Oct. 20, 1971, the wing was redesignated the 15th Air Base Wing and assigned to the Pacific Air Forces. It activated at Hickam AFB, Hawaii, on Nov. 1, 1971, assuming the mission and duties previously performed by the 6486th Air Base Wing, which was simultaneously inactivated.

The 15th ABW managed Hickam, Wheeler, Dillingham, and Johnston Island Air Force Bases, Bellows Air Force Station, and several smaller subsidiary bases. Responsibility for Johnston Island subsequently transferred to the Defense Nuclear Agency on July 1, 1973; but on that same date, the 15th ABW assumed operational responsibility for Wake Island. Dillingham later transferred to Army control on Feb. 27, 1975, as did Wheeler AFB on Nov. 1, 1991. In 1999, the 15th ABW once again assumed responsibility for Johnston Island. Operational control of Wake Island transferred to the 36th Air Base Wing (13th Air Force), Andersen AFB, Guam, on Oct. 1, 2000.

On Apr. 28, 2003, the wing was redesignated as the 15th Airlift Wing in light of its near-future mission as home to C-17 Globemaster III aircraft, the newest most flexible cargo in the airlift force. The C-17s were scheduled to begin arriving in December 2005.

Activation of the 15th ABW at Hickam AFB continued the lineage of a distinguished Air Force unit in its original geographic location.

Since 1971, the wing has added eight Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards (AFOUAs) to the two inherited from its predecessors. The first was earned in 1975 when 15th ABW personnel fed, sheltered, and moved 93,987 orphans, refugees, and evacuees from Southeast Asia during Operations Babylift and New Life; the second, in 1986, recognized the wing's assistance in the reception and subsequent resettlement in Hawaii of former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos, his family, and staff; the third AFOUA was awarded for meritorious service from July 1, 1989, to June 30, 1991; the fourth recognized the wing's exceptional service during the period July 1, 1991, to June 30, 1993; the fifth was for the wing's achievements from Oct. 1, 1993, through Sept. 30, 1995; the sixth recognized the wing's superior performance from Oct. 1, 1995, through Aug. 1, 1997; the seventh honored the wing's actions from Aug. 2, 1997, through Aug. 1, 1999; and the most recent recognized the wing's achievements from Nov. 29, 1999, through Nov. 30, 2001.

CURRENT MISSION

The mission of the 15th Air Base Wing is to enhance PACAF's power and reach by ensuring world-class en route support, maintaining operational ready forces, and providing superior customer service. The wing is a subordinate command of PACAF and reports directly to the Vice Commander, Pacific Air Forces.

A major responsibility of the wing is providing maintenance and refueling for aircraft transiting Hickam between the Continental United States and the Western Pacific, as well as housing and feeding transient personnel. The wing's 65th Airlift Squadron fly two assigned aircraft: a C-37A and a C-40B, which provide airlift for the Commander in Chief, United States Pacific Command, and for the Commander, Pacific Air Forces, in addition to supporting other PACAF air operations. During 2003, the wing began construction on base infrastructure in preparation for the coming C-17 mission.

Air Force installations under the wing's jurisdiction include:

Hickam Air Force Base -- Home of Headquarters Pacific Air Forces and the 15th Air Base Wing, this is the largest installation in the wing and consists of 2,850 acres of land and facilities valued at more than \$405 million. Sharing its runways with adjacent Honolulu International Airport (HIA), Hickam and the HIA constitute a single airport complex operated under a joint-use agreement.

Bellows Air Force Station -- Covering some 1,050 acres in the Waimanalo area on the east side of Oahu, this station is operated by Detachment 1, 15th Support Group. On Jan. 25, 2000, the Air Force transferred all but 499 acres of Bellows to the Marines. The Marines use the portion transferred for training. The area also housed the Hawaii Army National Guard's Military Academy. The land retained by the Air Force serves as a recreation center for military personnel of all services, complete with a beach, cabins and the amenities of a small base.

Johnston Atoll -- Four small islands with a total area of 691 acres are located about 717 nautical miles southwest of Hickam. On the main island sits Johnston Atoll Airfield. While Hickam had held real property responsibility for Johnston Atoll, it had relinquished operational control in the 1970s. On Oct. 1, 1999, the 15th Air Base Wing resumed operational control of the island while the Army continued to perform the primary mission of chemical agent disposal. Since the Army completed its mission of chemical munitions disposal in 2002, Det 1 was planned to be deactivated on Dec. 9, 2003.

(Current as of December 2003)