

Tucked into the base of the Italian Alps, hardened aircraft shelters protect the F-16s of the 31st Fighter Wing.

The 31st Fighter Wing and a unique composite wing fly combat sorties almost daily out of Aviano AB, Italy.

THE FORCE AT AVIANO

Photographs by Paul Kennedy and Guy Aceto, Art Director





Above, a fully loaded F-16C from the 31st FW's 510th Fighter Squadron sits in front of a hardened aircraft shelter on a drizzly morning, awaiting its next mission.

Critical to these operations is the 4190th Provisional Wing. A truly composite organization, the wing brings Decisive Edge aircraft and personnel from other NATO countries, Army, Navy, and Marine air units, and USAF's active-duty and Guard and Reserve all under one chain of command. These units spend from two to six months under the provisional wing. Only twelve of the 31st FW's F-16s are tasked for Decisive Edge missions, under the 4190th PW, at any one time. The wing has a twenty-four-hour operations cell for command and control of all Decisive Edge operations at Aviano.



Photos by Paul Kennedy



Not far from the flight line, where this Marine F/A-18 (above) launches on another Decisive Edge mission, is the town of Aviano (left)—its Old World architecture in contrast to the surrounding high-tech military operations. Aviano has hosted USAF since the mid-1950s, when Det. 1, 17th Air Force, arrived. Not all of the 31st FW's units are located here, however; the 31st Munitions Squadron and the 31st Rapid Engineer Deployable, Heavy Operational Repair Squadron, Engineer (RED HORSE) Flight are located near Padua, and the 31st Munitions Support Squadron is at Ghedi AB, Italy. Units farther afield are the 731st Munitions Support Squadron at Araxos AB, Greece, and the 496th Air Base Squadron at Morón AB, Spain.



As tactics in the skies over Bosnia were being developed, the 31st FW's two F-16 fighter squadrons took on a new role: airborne forward air control. The idea that an AFAC mission could be performed at high speeds and altitudes seemed improbable at first, but the F-16 pilots sought the job to become less dependent on other aircraft to locate targets for them and to gain better mission flexibility on ground-support missions. In February 1995, F-16 pilots from Aviano traveled to Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., for AFAC training with A/OA-10 AFAC pilots. They discovered that the F-16's speed, maneuverability, avionics, Low-Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night pod, and laser designator offered many advantages over the A-10 usually used for AFAC. They also learned how to employ the LAU-131 rocket pod and its seven white phosphorus marker rockets, the F-16's newest weapon (mounted on the aircraft at right, along with AIM-120 and AIM-9 air-to-air missiles). By September 1995, the 31st FW was performing the AFAC role during Deliberate Force. The wing's 555th and 510th Fighter Squadrons continue to refine the art of AFAC in Decisive Edge missions.





At Aviano, the 31st FW Intelligence Flight constantly receives updates on potential threat areas. At left, TSgt. Larry Gagliano goes over a potential target with an intel officer. To give aircrews every possible edge, intel personnel began working with computer software engineers to create a system that could plan routes, allow intel technicians to look at targets from any angle, and combine information for future missions. The resulting software, "Power Scene," allows mission planners to determine the best approach to a target. It also lets crews "fly" the mission repeatedly to iron out problems before embarking on the actual sortie.

The 603d Air Control Squadron handles several facets of the Aviano mission. As part of USAF's Theater Air Control System, it supports NATO ground forces through collection of information on aerial activity and radar coverage for control of air forces. It supports the 31st FW's and Decisive Edge training missions and Decisive Edge northern aerial refuelings. It also links commanders at Aviano, ground forces in Bosnia, and airborne crews. From small, portable units like the one at right—where SrA. Mike Copeland communicates via satellite with a counterpart in Sarajevo—the 603d ACS can link units in Germany and Hungary. The unit's technicians maintain all of their own equipment and can deploy on very short notice.



Real-world missions require live weapons, and the munitions crews at Aviano probably see more live rounds than most. These weapons specialists not only keep pace with the daily missions, but they were also vital in designing procedures for the LAU-131 rocket pods when the new system came on line. Aviano's crews must be proficient with eleven types of weapons that the wing's Block 40 F-16C can carry. Everything from 20-mm gun rounds to laser-guided bombs are part of the day-to-day loads that these experienced, highly skilled crews handle.



Photos by Paul Kennedy

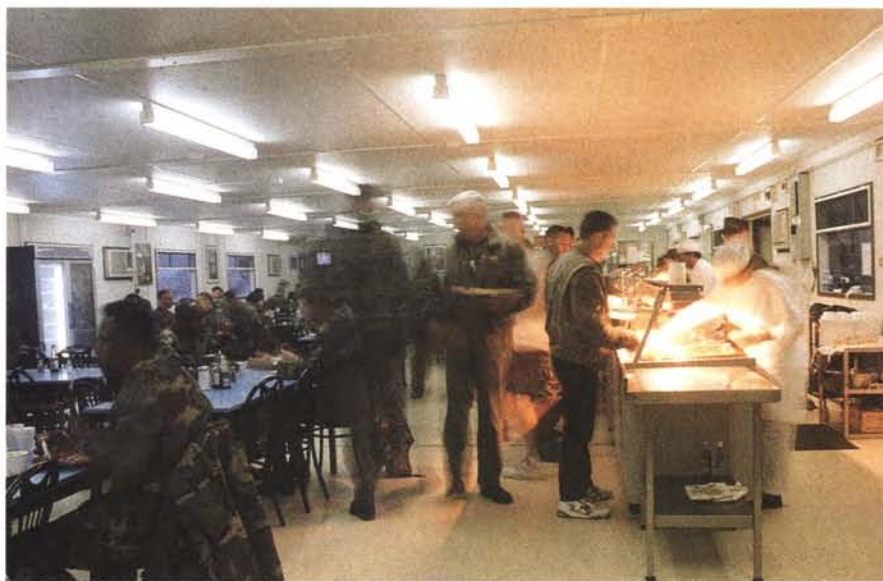
Headquarters for 16th Air Force, Aviano AB hosts two of the numbered air force's three major elements: the 31st FW and the 616th Regional Support Group. (The third is the 39th Wing at Incirlik AB, Turkey.) The 31st FW's commander, Brig. Gen. Charles F. Wald, and the 31st Operations Group commander, Col. Marc E. Rogers, serve also as commander and operations group commander, respectively, for the 4190th PW. The wing (originally activated as the 7490th PW in June 1995) has its own budget and NATO chain of command. Packages of aircraft from squadrons on TDY to Aviano augment the provisional wing's Decisive Edge missions. Recently, these units have included RAF's No. 8 Squadron of E-3 Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft and the 103d Fighter Wing (ANG) with its A-10s (above), on its second rotation to Aviano from Bradley IAP, Conn. An EA-6B Prowler from Marine unit VMAQ-4 (right), moving out in the early morning for one of the first sorties of the day, is another part of the package. The CH-47 Chinooks (bottom right) are from the Army's Company E, 502d Aviation Regiment, one of the 31st FW's major tenants.





Almost half of the actual base, including the commissary, support facilities, and dormitories, is in the town of Aviano, but because of the TDY population explosion, most TDY ground crews and even some pilots stay in the small community of prefabricated buildings at left. As a quality-of-life initiative for the deployed troops, \$6 million was spent on upgrades for these trailers, such as hard floors, walls, heating and air-conditioning, and sound suppression.

In the temporary village—nick-named “Tendopoli” as an attempt to Italianize “tent city”—the dining hall is one of the larger structures. Lt. Col. Cory E. Richards, AFRES, is Tendopoli’s commandant, managing an operation that oversees an average TDY population of 800. Aviano’s total military population is approximately 9,000.



Common at overseas bases, hardened aircraft shelters evoke memories of the Cold War. They still have their uses, as security remains a concern. Working on an aircraft under cover is safer and—on a rainy day—drier. The shelters can operate as service stations if an increased operations tempo necessitates turning the aircraft more quickly than usual. At left, an F-16 from the 510th FS prepares for a Decisive Edge mission over Bosnia, proving that the inside of a hardened aircraft shelter makes for a noisy engine start-up.



Photo by Paul Kennedy

Activity at the 31st FW shows no sign of slowing. Operations at Aviano continue to receive solid backing from the Italian Air Force hosts, NATO, and USAFE, and new construction takes place daily to improve flight line activities and support facilities in town.

A high operations tempo means getting training whenever and wherever you can. Aviano does not have a nearby range, but its squadrons can train with a variety of allies, something not many others have a chance to do. It could be mock air-to-air combat with visiting German MiG-29s or practice at the Air Combat Maneuvering Instrumentation range near Decimomannu AB, on the Italian island of Sardinia. Above, the flagship of the "Triple Nickel" comes home after training at NATO ranges in Spain. Given Aviano's central location and its vital role in Europe's southern region, the turnaround for a real-world mission could be quick. But the force at Aviano is ready. ■



Staff photos by Guy Aceto

