

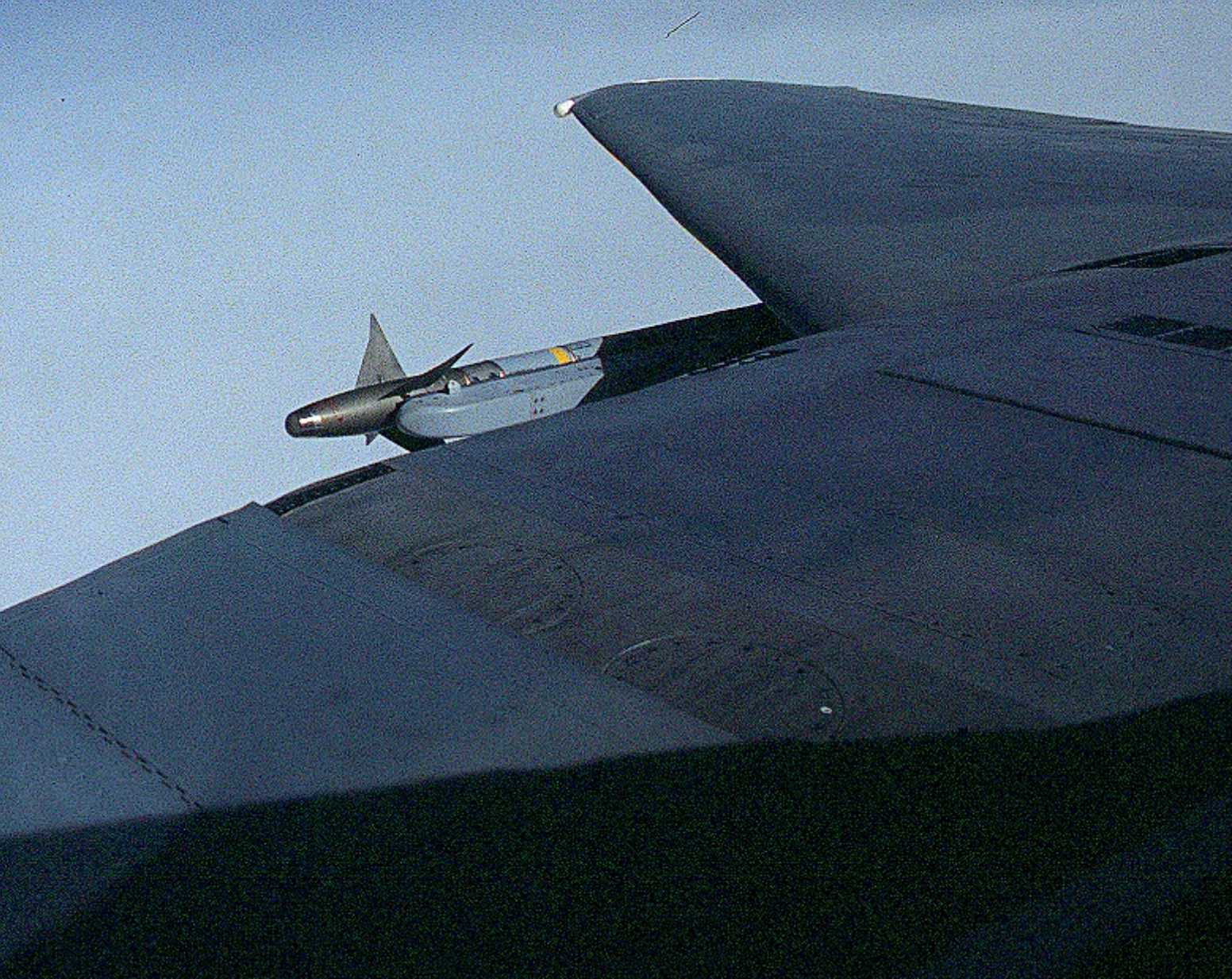
For this Air National Guard fighter wing, the front line in the war on terror is in its own backyard.

REDHAWK CAP



Photography by Guy Aceto, Art Director, and Erik Hildebrandt

Cruising at nearly 35,000 feet, F-15s from the Oregon ANG's 142nd Fighter Wing patrol the sky over Seattle.



High above the cloud deck, an F-15 from the 123rd Fighter Squadron Redhawks, from the Oregon Air National Guard's 142nd Fighter Wing, begins a Combat Air Patrol, part of Operation Noble Eagle.

Ever since two F-15s at Otis ANGB, Mass., received their scramble order at 8:46 a.m. on Sept. 11, Combat Air Patrols have been a constant presence in the skies over New York and Washington, D.C. Guard, Reserve, and active fighter, air refueling, and airlift aircraft have carried out those CAPs, as well as random patrols over many other urban areas.



Staff photos by Guy Aceto



Redhawk F-15As—their fin flashes showing a hawk carrying a banner in its talon—are armed as they fly a typical CAP sortie. The unit has been averaging more than 40 such missions a month.

Ready in their alert shelters, these armed F-15s can get airborne within a few minutes.

The Redhawks, operating under Air Combat Command and NORAD, guard the Pacific Northwest from the Canadian border into northern California.

The squadron and the wing trace their beginnings to April 1941 to the 123rd Observation Squadron.





Photo by Erik Hildebrandt

Redhawks fly in formation past the Oregon coast, on the way to mock aerial combat over the Pacific. Plenty of power and an excellent radar make the F-15s ideal for the air defense—air sovereignty role.



Above, pilots suit up. For them, Combat Air Patrols mean up to five hours of straight and level flying. In the Cold War, the pilots knew what to look for; today, the threat is not well-defined or predictable.

Photo by Erik Hildebrandt

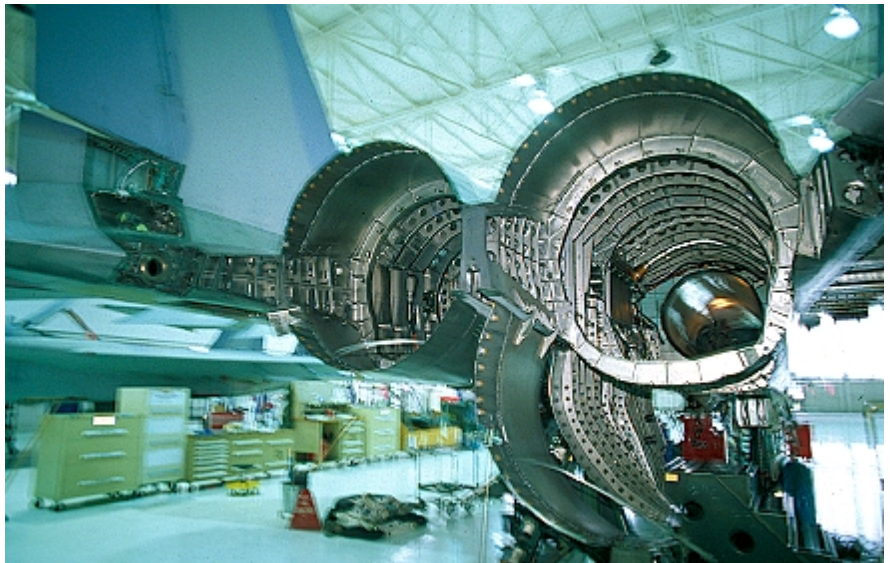


Staff photos by Guy Aceto



Above, ground crews go through their paces to launch the next sortie. At left, an F-15 takes off, while in the background, a commercial airliner—just above the Eagle's tail—lifts off from a parallel runway. The ANG unit is located on 245 acres of leased land on the south side of Portland Airport in Oregon.

The 123rd comprises 18 F-15s, all of which have more than the normal amount of flying time on their airframes. The unit's F-15s are all more than 20 years old, but the multistage improvement program and skilled maintenance keep them in shape—whether for alert duty or for daily missions. Preventive maintenance is the order of the day. Wing personnel carry out near-depot-level maintenance to keep the F-15As flying.



Staff photos by Guy Aceto



At left, back from a sortie, this fighter is met by SrA. Jessica Reilly, who checks the weapons and (below) changes out a flare box.



Fuel trucks work their way down the line, getting the fighters ready for the next set of sorties. With the squadron on a full-time schedule, sorties take place even at night. This gives the crews practice with night vision equipment that they'll need in case of an evening intercept.

Combat Air Patrols in the Pacific Northwest gained urgency after photos of Seattle's Space Needle landmark were discovered in an al Qaeda computer during military operations in Afghanistan. They were described as "tourist type" photos and not evidence of a direct threat against the state, but they highlighted the need for vigilance.





The F-15 Eagles mix it up to keep their skills sharp. Combat Air Patrol aircraft across the US responded to 270 airborne incidents from Sept. 11 through February.



The 123rd responded to one such incident in mid-February. Police received a call from an unidentified person claiming there was a bomb aboard a commercial airplane. Two F-15s from the 123rd escorted the airliner to Sea-Tac Airport, Wash. No bomb was found.

Staff photo by Guy Aceto



In addition to CAPs, crews still regularly train with nearby Canadian units as well as attend exercises such as Red Flag during the year.



The need for more aircraft on alert to cover their area of responsibility moved up planned construction of four new alert hangars on the 142nd Fighter Wing's flight line.



Staff photos by Guy Aceto



At left, TSgt. Timothy Lear checks in while patrolling the flight line. New barriers at various points around the facility are just one sign of the increased security. Note the warning on the ramp, above: "Use of deadly force authorized." Trucks heading for the construction sites get searched, too. Wing security forces are busy, not just at the unit but also with deployments to other locations.

Over the years, the wing has taken part in drug interdiction efforts around the world, US Air Forces in Europe air defense, and Operations Northern Watch and Southern Watch in the Middle East.

Gen. Richard B. Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Noble Eagle sorties numbered more than 13,000 between Sept. 11 and February. They featured ANG, Reserve, active duty, and NATO aircrews. Myers added that USAF had 260 airplanes committed to the effort, with 1,200 airmen flying nearly 57,000 hours from 29 bases. In all, some 11,000 airmen take part in the operation.

Rain or shine, the CAP missions go on. At right, in a drizzle typical of the Pacific Northwest, an alert fighter stops near the end of the runway.





Photo by Erik Hildebrandt

Combat Air Patrols have called for enormous effort from all elements of the Total Force. The strain has been showing. In January, a DOD spokesman said that CAPs will continue to be a very important part of protecting the American people but, later, indicated the operation could be scaled back if conditions warrant.



Staff photos by Guy Aceto

Although CAPs are often flown high above the cloud cover—almost out of sight to those on the ground—they are not out of mind. Oregonians across the state have written to the Redhawks to thank unit members.



For more than 60 years, the 142nd has performed its mission of air defense for the northwest sector of the "lower 48." Today, wing personnel are more than ever aware of what this responsibility means to their neighbors—and to the country. ■