



GEORGIA



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Two Cultures, One Force

The future looks blended in middle Georgia

by Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts

opening photo by Senior Airman Tim Beckham

Imagine being handed a drawing of an elaborate dish that's never been prepared and told to have it ready by dinnertime. You're provided the ingredients but left to your own devices to figure out the recipe. Change that. Have it ready by lunch, please. Oh, and one more thing — failure is not an option.

A similar scenario is underway at Robins Air Force Base, Ga., where active duty airmen and Air National Guardsmen have been busy blending themselves into the first "Total Force" wing.

When the 116th Bomb Wing mission went away in June 2001, about a thousand guardsmen unexpectedly found themselves without jobs. But in August 2001, the secretary of the Air Force stepped in and proposed a

Brig. Gen. Tom Lynn (right), 116th Air Control Wing commander, stands with vice commander Col. Mark Hall on the Robins Air Force Base, Ga., flight line in front of a joint surveillance target attack radar system aircraft. The "GA" tail marking is what the 116th Bomb Wing used on its B-1 Lancer bombers. All wing E-8C aircraft are in the process of having their tails changed to "GA" from "WR" — the marking used by the 93rd Air Control Wing before the two wings merged to create the Air Force's first blended wing.

merging of forces and taking on the mission of the 93rd Air Control Wing.

They had until October 2004 to make it happen. But then the deadline was accelerated by two years to October 2002 at the prompting of Air Combat Command headquarters. Three months later, the emerging wing found itself in the thick of war during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

“If you said let’s try to make this as hard as possible, I think this is a pretty good recipe,” said Col. Mark Hall, vice commander for the 116th Air Control Wing. “There are a lot of days you think, ‘Hmm, I never thought about that.’ But now those things that make you go ‘hmm’ aren’t as frequent.”

For instance, if military legal action is deemed necessary toward an active duty member, the wing commander, Brig. Gen. Tom Lynn, can’t initiate action because he’s an air guard technician — a government civilian employee — during the week who wears a military uniform. By law, a technician can’t perform certain command actions against an active duty member except when activated.

That issue was resolved by designating Colonel Hall as commander for the active duty element, but overall approval is still maintained by General Lynn through close coordination. Congressional approval is being evaluated to broaden the commander’s leadership authority.

“It’s been pretty transparent,” Colonel Hall said of the

unique leadership roles they face in commanding the 116th, whose mission is to fly the E-8C joint surveillance target attack radar system and provide airborne battle management, command and control, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance to ground and air component commanders.

Dark days in Georgia

But the future looked cloudy for Master Sgt. Ben Simmons when the guardsman heard the Air Force planned to reduce the B-1 Lancer fleet to 60 aircraft and relocate the remaining bombers to Dyess Air Force Base, Texas, and Ellsworth Force Base, S.D. There would be no follow-on mission for the Guard, which meant no paycheck for Sergeant Simmons, who had just closed on a new house and whose wife was pregnant.

“I was stressing,” said Sergeant Simmons, an air guard technician in the logistics readiness squadron. This position is a full-time guardsman slot paid the same as if on active duty, but not subject to permanent change of station moves. There are about 600 full-time guardsmen in the 116th, along with about 575 traditional guardsmen. They work alongside approximately 1,625 active duty airmen and more than 200 civilian contractors. Reconciling the manpower document to reflect such a mix remains one of the major challenges for the wing.

Like many guardsmen, Sergeant Simmons was once

by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

Airman 1st Class Deaniella Roy (left) and Tech. Sgt. Gerald Kidby, fuel system specialists with the 116th Maintenance Squadron, take air quality readings before entering the E-8C forward fuel bladder for inspection. They are two of the 1,625 active duty members assigned to the wing.



on active duty, so the blend was an easy transition culturally. But logistically it was a bumpy ride in the early going.

“It was tough at first. Neither of us asked for this to happen. We weren’t ready for it,” he said. The mix of supervision requires three different rating systems, but the sergeant said such issues are an “educational thing”

and are far outweighed by the benefits reaped.

In addition to enjoying a manpower increase in his office from three to 14, Sergeant Simmons pointed out advantages noted by many others. The Guard provides a steady source of seasoned experts, while active duty forces bring new ideas and a broad knowledge based on past assignments and deployments.

“It’s worked out really well for us,” he said. “If you walked into our office you wouldn’t know whether someone was active duty or Guard.”

A good mixture

That same seamlessness is evident at the communications flight where Maj. Fred Massey describes his evenly mixed batch of active duty and Guard troops as “poster children for total force.” However, indicators still exist showing the two halves of the wing haven’t completely homogenized yet. The unit quarterly awards board for the communications flight displays a separate photo of a Guard and active duty winner for each category. Not to show favoritism, winners are arranged alphabetically. Next year, he said there will be only one winner in each category.

“It’s going good, but it’s not normal yet,” said Major Massey, an air guard technician. “But it will be normal and efficient in a few years.”

Like other units, he said his people experienced growing pains such as learning each other’s methods of performance reports and annual evaluations. Guard evaluations are based more on the long-term approach of developing people as a part of your hometown Air Force. As a result, he explained, they don’t demand the same level of detail as for active duty forces, who can relocate every

by Staff Sgt. Suzanne M. Jenkins



Airman 1st Class David Perrine, a guardsman with the 116th Maintenance Squadron,

replaces a cracked panel on an E-8C while deployed to Southwest Asia in February. A maintenance force of about 75 percent active duty and 25 percent Guard deployed to two forward bases supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom. Converting the guardsmen to active duty status was complicated, but once on the ground, things worked smoothly.

three years and require written documentation to capture their accomplishments for the benefit of supervisors who don’t have first-hand knowledge of the individual’s track record.

“Both systems are right and good,” he said, noting that some of his active duty supervisors enjoy the concise and focused nature of Guard evaluations as opposed to the active duty version that demands more attention to “buzz words.”

He also has been faced with the concern noted by commanders and supervisors alike — the possible effect a more relaxed working climate among guardsmen has on active duty first-term airmen. Major Massey said he believes the best of both cultures can be blended into a combination beneficial to everyone.

“We want it to be the best job in their career,” he said of the challenge of molding young airmen. “I like a casual organization, but I also like a professional atmosphere. Striking a mix of family and professionalism, that’s a perfect place to work.”

Senior Airman Sarah Battles is a first-term airman who said the new work culture did indeed come as a surprise at first. But now the network administrator said she prefers the unique way the wing works.

“It was weird hearing people call each other by their first name, but we have gotten used to a more relaxed atmosphere,” she said. Airman Battles said she and fellow active duty members still use ranks in addressing each other; however, she believes the close-knit Guard community is a good thing and makes the office “like one big family.” Professionally, she said she has more opportunity to broaden her knowledge now that Joint STARS is less dependent on the host wing for communication support.

by Master Sgt. Efrain Gonzalez

Jet engine mechanics Tech. Sgt. Brian Bentzel (left) and Airman 1st Class Phillip Digeno look

over an engine during a periodic engine inspection. Sergeant Bentzel is an air guard technician and Airman Digeno is on active duty. The wing went through growing pains when it first “blended” 1,175 guardsmen and 1,675 active duty airmen, but now it’s difficult to tell them apart because they seamlessly work to accomplish the same mission.



She’s one of many active duty wing members contemplating switching to the Guard because of its camaraderie and the opportunity to remain rooted in one location.

A maintenance mix-up

The challenge to blend and bond was especially prevalent for maintainers. A full complement of about 800 active duty E-8C maintainers was on hand when the 116th inherited approximately 400 Guard maintainers. By mandate, no guardsman would lose his or her job. The task of molding the maintainers fell to Col. Terry Kinney, who said he knew what he was getting into when he came into “the experiment.”

“We had some of the toughest issues to deal with in a compressed timeframe,” said the active duty officer who arrived five months before the official merger. Although provided no roadmap leading to the blended wing, the colonel said he soon learned that “we consciously had to drive down the center line whether we liked it or not,” while “working emotional issues and making the mission happen.”

Failure, he said, was not an option, but at times it must have seemed like a possibility. The four-day workweek afforded while maintaining the B-1 was replaced with the 24/7 posture required for the Joint STARS mission. A bottleneck inevitably developed in the training pipeline.

Separate maintenance instructions used by active duty and the Guard are still being reconciled. A technician, required by law to wear a uniform, with master sergeant stripes is by regulation unable to supervise the two-striper working beside him — unless deployed. That opportunity was soon realized.

The honeymoon’s over

Soon after the two entities “got married,” Colonel Kinney said, maintainers were off to a demanding honeymoon supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom. A maintenance force of about 75 percent active duty and 25 percent Guard deployed to two forward bases. Getting the Guard downrange presented a whole new set of complications associated with converting them to active duty status. But once on the ground, maintainers achieved 99 percent sortie effectiveness for the nine aircraft that logged 2,663 hours above the battlefield. The war made an impact on the blending process.

“It put everybody on the same playing field. The focus went from challenges to getting the job done,” said Chief Master Sgt. Steve Folkerts, the maintenance group superintendent.

A soldier’s perspective

Their wartime performance was conducted with seam-

less efficiency from the standpoint of their Army counterparts, who comprise the joint aspect of Joint STARS. Army Sgt. Daniel Weber, an airborne targeting surveillance specialist, lauded the flexibility and adaptability of guardsmen joining the unit.

“Within months they integrated with us and went to war with us. You have to give them credit,” said Sergeant Weber, who can empathize with the Guard after himself learning to adapt to the Air Force way of life when he arrived at Robins.

Sergeant Weber was aboard the Joint STARS mission during the height of the war when Iraqi forces attempted a covert maneuver during a sandstorm. His counterpart, Army Sgt. 1st Class Gregory Thompson, spotted the Iraqi convoy headed toward 4th Infantry Division soldiers and helped set the wheels in motion to launch a devastating air attack. Even at 31,000 feet, he said the flickering lights of explosions were visible from the carnage below.

Another Army operator aboard Joint STARS also noted that the blend occurred with only the usual bumps in the road that accompany organizational change. But Lt. Col. Stephen Gomillion said he likes the addition of former B-1 crews to the Joint STARS mission.

“They bring a lot to the table,” the deputy mission crew commander said. “They were the guys actually striking the targets.” Now, in their new role aboard Joint STARS, he explained, they’ll be able to use their insight to provide better information to the war fighter. They can say, “This is how it works. I did it.”

One of those former B-1 aircrew members is Maj. Greg McCreary, who was a weapon systems officer aboard the B-1 Lancer and now is nearing the end of the training pipeline to become a Joint STARS air battle manager. He looks forward to sharing his insight.

“We used to be the guys Joint STARS talked to, so we know what they need to hear having experience at the pointy end of the stick and now bringing it here,” he said.

No turning back

His fate might well be the future for others in an Air Force redefining itself. The “blending” has drawn visitors from other commands and even the

General Accounting Office, which went to Robins for a glimpse of how to build a total force wing.

“They see the writing on the wall. There’s not enough iron to go around the spectrum of the Air Force,” said Colonel Hall, noting that with the aging air fleet other units may well find themselves in similar situations as the former B-1 guardsmen at Robins.

The 116th is keeping notes, of course, on how it’s negotiating a world of change in a short amount of time. The bad news is there’s no template, but the good news is that if it can work with a blend of contrasting missions, especially with one of them with a high-demand, low-density mission such as Joint STARS, it should work even smoother between units with similar missions. But despite the growing pains, and challenges yet to come, General Lynn said he would’ve followed the same path.

“Even with the benefit of hindsight, I’m not sure that we would have, or could have, done anything differently,” the commander said. “There was no specific guidance, no existing template, no previous experience with this blended concept — no one with any answers on how to make this work. We just happened to be the first.

“We still have issues that emerge that we never considered or even imagined, and we still have challenges to work through. We consider ourselves still evolving as an organization. And as we evolve, we will naturally mature into a new culture — one that capitalizes upon, and embraces, the strengths of both the active duty and the Air National Guard. One team, one family, one fight.” ☪

by Staff Sgt. Shane Cuomo



More blends

To read about some of the future total force benefits and integrated missions Secretary of the Air Force James Roche and Chief of Staff Gen. John Jumper highlighted in recent speeches, go to www.af.mil/speech/speech.asp?speechID=16 and www.af.mil/speech/speech.asp?speechID=44.

An E-8C joint surveillance target attack radar system

flies over the Robins flight line and other Joint STARS aircraft on the ground. The 116th is still evolving as an organization and maturing into a new culture that capitalizes upon the strengths of both its active duty and Guard members.