

# Eyes on the Skies

*1st  
Air  
Force  
looks  
inward  
to  
keep  
America safe*

by Tech. Sgt. Mark Kinkade

opening photo by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

**Maj. Tom O'Berg sprints to an F-15C Eagle** standing alert at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska. The 12th Fighter Squadron stands alert as part of Operation Noble Eagle, the defense of North American airspace. Within minutes of receiving a call reporting unidentified aircraft approaching U.S. airspace, he and other pilots will taxi their aircraft out of the combat alert cell and quickly climb the skies over Alaska's Chugach mountain range.



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.

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 [See “The Enemy from Within,” December 2003]. 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 McKin-

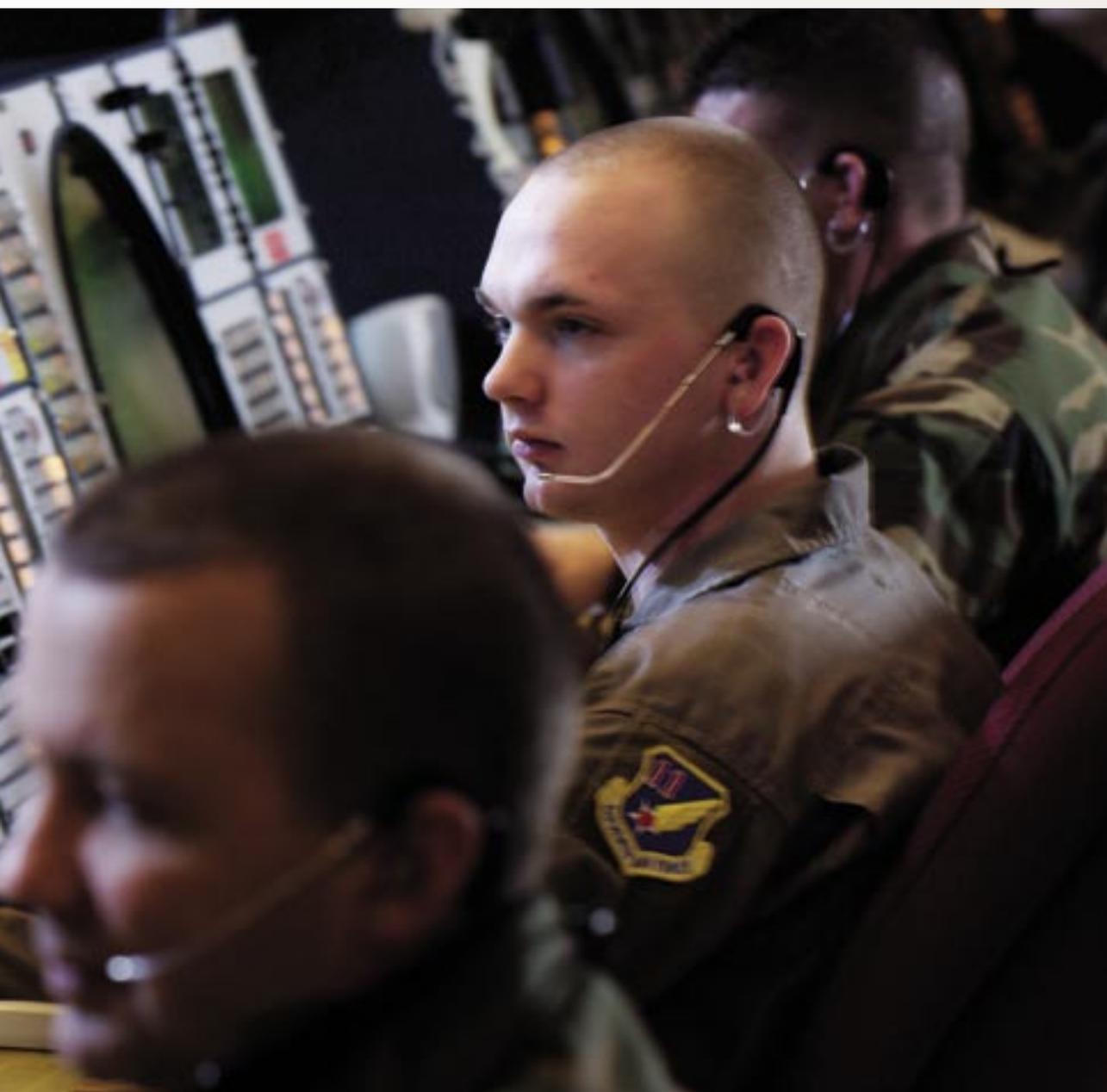
by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers



ley, 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 im-



mediately. 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

**Airman 1st Class 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 Eagle's air superiority mission over the northern frontier. If the squadron can't identify an approaching aircraft, a chain of events quickly unfolds that can include launching an F-15 for a visual identification.

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 [See "Inner Space," March 2002]. 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

by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung

### **A 940th Air Refueling KC-135 Stratotanker**

*from Beale Air Force Base, Calif., prepares to gas up two F-16 Fighting Falcons from the 144th Fighter Wing based in Fresno, Calif., above San Francisco’s Golden Gate Bridge. The Air Force Reserve Command tanker and fighter fleets fly regular training patrols as vital components to Noble Eagle, along with Air National Guard and active duty aircraft and people.*



## **Homeland defense Alaska style**

In Alaska, homeland defense north of the lower 48 states is only a slide and a sprint away from being airborne.

The only active duty combat alert cell remains on 24-hour duty at Elmendorf Air Force Base. When the deafening klaxon jolts out its warning of a potential airspace threat, pilots and maintainers spring out of bed at their alert housing quarters, slide down a fireman’s pole, race to an awaiting F-15 Eagle, and have the aircraft airborne often in less than 10 minutes.

“It’s like being a fireman with airplanes instead of fire trucks,” said Staff Sgt. James Zumwalt, an F-15 crew chief who’s been pulling alert duty for the past two years alongside two pilots and six to eight fellow maintainers.

The “fire” alarm comes from across the flight line where Airmen from Canada and the United States monitor the skies for threats within their regional air operations center. Each day, Airmen sit before radar screens in a dimly lit room where they monitor as many as 700 aircraft that traverse daily across their area of responsibility encompassing approximately 1.3 million square miles. The center falls under the Alaskan NORAD Region which is one of three North

American Aerospace Defense regions responsible for homeland aerospace defense. The other two are the Canadian NORAD Region and the Continental U.S. NORAD Region.

Tracking technicians watch with knowing eyes as civilian and military aircraft emerge on their screens as green blips. The vast majority are quickly authenticated by nearby identification technicians through sources such as the Federal Aviation Administration, the Coast Guard and other military agencies.

But sometimes they’re not. If an aircraft can’t be identified and is seen as a potential threat, people like Maj. Rob Murphy, a Canadian mission crew

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.

### 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 1970s. 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



commander, must within minutes relay information to higher headquarters for a coordinated course of action. Such measures have always been taken with utmost seriousness, especially during the Cold War when the threat of the former Soviet Union lay separated from Alaska only by the Bering Sea. Now, that threat has been replaced.

"The events of 9-11 are flashing through your mind. The urgency is there," Major Murphy said. Also present is the reality that terrorists could once again hijack a commercial aircraft, and that military force could be required to thwart terrorist objectives.

Maj. Tom O'Berg has been at the receiving end waiting for such a call

about 15 times during the past two-and-a-half years. The F-15 pilot said spending two days on continuous alert can be "mind-numbing."

"But you know it's an important job, and you've got to keep your mind focused on what you're doing," he said.

During the Cold War, he said intercepting Soviet aircraft encroaching on U.S. airspace was a more straightforward affair in that the warning time was longer and the source of the threat was obvious. The wall of the radar operations center is almost covered with red stars mounted on small plaques marking past intercepts of Soviet aircraft that in most cases ended with a U.S. fighter pilot taking a photograph of the intruder.

Now, the warning time is significantly shorter, and pilots face a problematic situation in confronting civilian aircraft with inherent rights to Alaskan airspace. An unidentified pilot could be no more than a private aviator who unknowingly sends out a wrong signal on his transponder.

"It keeps you on edge all the time," said Major O'Berg, assistant director of operations for the 3rd Operations Support Squadron. But it also provides a source of pride among the pilots, maintainers and technicians at Elmendorf.

"Sleep well," he said. "Your Air Force is protecting you."

— Master Sgt. Chuck Roberts

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 deputy 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. [See "Homeland Patrol," March 2002].

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

### **Crew chiefs with Beale's 940th Aircraft Maintenance**

**Squadron,** Staff Sgt. Alison Baker (from left), Airman 1st Class Darren Phelps, Staff Sgt. Brandon Kennerley and Senior Master Sgt. Nancy Hinojosa, discuss the day's maintenance tasks near a KC-135. The Stratotankers participate in homeland defense missions in the western United States.

by Master Sgt. Lance Cheung



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 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.” ☪

by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers



### **Operation Noble Eagle isn’t just patrolling the nation’s**

**skies.** Security forces members Staff Sgt. William Mayberry (right), Staff Sgt. Sara Fitzgerald and others from the 354th Security Forces Squadron use snowmobiles to patrol a five-mile section of the trans-Alaskan pipeline that snakes its way through Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska. Considered one of the most difficult engineering feats of all times, the four-foot diameter pipeline originates 250 miles north of the Arctic Circle and spans 800 miles over three mountain ranges and 34 waterways before ending in the Alaskan port of Valdez.

### **Unified in defense**

The mission of defending the United States from both external and internal attacks falls to a tightly-knit collective of regional defense organizations and federal agencies 1st Air Force officials call “America’s NATO.” Understanding the multiple roles and responsibilities of units and commands from Florida to Colorado to Ottawa can be as difficult as understanding a NATO command structure plan.

Understanding the Air Force

role in homeland defense is easier, however. In short, 1st Air Force has the stick, while North American Aerospace Defense Command keeps an eye on things.

Basically, 1st Air Force, operating from Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla., is responsible for providing air support in defense of the continental United States. NORAD provides warning and control against all internal and external threats. Northern Command, a unified land, sea and air command, is the overall governor for North America’s defense on the land, in the

air and at sea. 11th Air Force at Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska, patrols Alaska, and 1st Canadian Air Division has charge over Canadian air space.

To manage the homeland defense of the continental United States, 1st Air Force divides the country into three air defense sectors — Western Air Defense Sector at McChord Air Force Base, Wash., Northeastern Air Defense Sector in Rome, N.Y., and Southeastern Air Defense Sector at Tyndall.

— Tech. Sgt. Mark Kinkade