



They flew so many sorties in so little time, one would have thought they were in a war. In a way, they were. Protecting America is a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week job.

by Tech. Sgt. Orville F. Desjarlais Jr.
photos by Master Sgt. Scott Wagers

Staff Sgt. James Trolio had never worked so hard in his life.

His job as a jet engine mechanic was to keep the 34th Fighter Squadron F-16s flying 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It was difficult. Extremely difficult.

Operation Iraqi Freedom was in full swing when Trolio and 207 members of his squadron, based at Hill Air Force Base, Utah, deployed in February with 13 Fighting Falcons to do their part. Except their orders didn't say Iraq or Afghanistan. They were sent to Langley Air Force Base, Va., as part of Operation Noble Eagle. They returned home, very tired, 70 days later.

Like any good football team, America needed a good offense and a good defense during the war. Noble Eagle provided the defense. On a rotational basis, and when deemed necessary, active duty and Air National Guard units were tasked with patrolling America's skies.

"We had [America's] back," said Lt. Col. Valentino Bagnani III, 34th Fighter Squadron commander. "Imagine if something would have happened to our national symbols of strength. We train for a shooting war, but our fate was to defend the United States."

And protect and defend they did, accumulating more than 3,000 flying hours in 70 days. At their home station at Hill Air Force Base, Utah, they usually fly about 3,500 hours a year.

Air patrols

In the two years since Sept. 11, 2001, more than 31,000 sorties — including fighters, tankers

Defenders of America

and airborne radar — have been flown by North American Aerospace Defense Command in defense of America. The Air National Guard has handled about three-quarters of all air patrols, according to officials at NORAD, headquartered at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo.

While in Virginia, the 34th intercepted numerous aircraft that weren't following the rules. Most intercepts involved small planes that strayed into restricted air space. Since Operation Noble Eagle's start, NORAD diverted air patrols and scrambled fighters more than 1,500 times. Sorties have been flown by active duty, Guard, Reserve and Canadian forces throughout Alaska, Canada and the continental United States. During the Virginia deployment, the 34th flew practically every day. "Basically, we flew no matter what," Bagnani said.

"No one in our squadron has ever deployed and

worked at that pace before. It was grueling," Trolio said.

During the entire deployment, Trolio had one day off. He washed his clothes that day. The maintainers stayed busy because keeping aircraft in the air around the clock was tough work. Everything was accelerated. For example, it's recommended to change vehicle oil every 3,000 miles. If a car is driven 24 hours a day, it's going to rack up those miles pretty quickly, requiring oil changes more frequently. The same goes for jets.

"The first nine days of the deployment were a real eye-opener," said Senior Master Sgt. Randy Robertson, the 34th Aircraft Maintenance Unit's lead production supervisor. "We realized it wasn't going to be an easy task. We had a major mind-set change. We were going to have to do our maintenance entirely different."

Shift work

On a normal flight line, maintainers split their jobs into three shifts. One shift cares for aircraft launch and recovery, another performs inspections and maintenance, while the other makes sure aircraft are serviced, ensuring each is ready by the next shift. During the Virginia deployment, every shift did all those tasks.

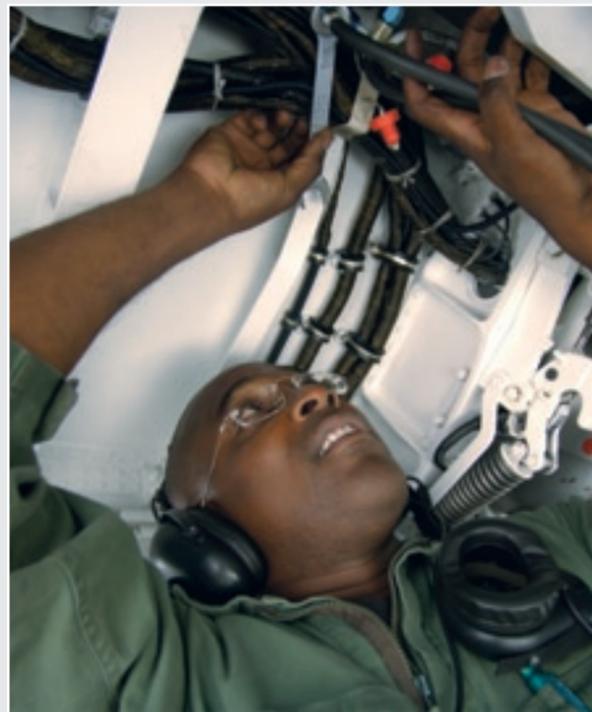
"I was proud of our guys and gals," Robertson said. "They were a class act. This wasn't an exercise, and every single one of us understood that."

Bagnani said he felt peculiar carrying live mis-



Staff Sgt. Cisco Castillo (above), an F-16 avionics technician at Hill, shows three-level trainee Airman 1st Class Jamie Johnson

how to make the cockpit safe before connecting external electrical power. "We were working 12- to 13-hour days on average, but it was definitely worthwhile," Castillo said. Castillo, Johnson and a third avionics technician (left) ready an F-16 for departure.



siles under his F-16's wings and flying over the nation's capital. "Noble Eagle couldn't have been more appropriately named. It's a noble mission."

Today, the unit prepares for its next deployment, be it in or outside the United States. It takes part in exercises and continues to fly over the Great Salt Lake basin and Salt Lake City's majestic mountains, location of the 2002 Winter Olympics. The 34th patrolled the skies for that event, too.

With two children of his own, Trolio felt extremely proud of his work during the Noble Eagle deployment. He said his unit is ready to deploy whenever and wherever needed. In the war against terrorism, he knows the call could come at any minute. ☼

