



Guard and Active AF *Team-Up* for Readiness

Partnership puts active-duty pilots and crew in the “active associate” South Carolina Air National Guard’s 169th Fighter Wing.

By Capt. Jim Roth

169th Fighter Wing Public Affairs



US Air Force photo by Master Sergeant Marvin Preston, 169th Fighter Wing/PA

MSgt Robert Woodward (left) and SSgt James Bishop, Hydrazine Response Team members, decontaminate parts removed from an F-16 during an exercise. McEntire Airmen were evaluated during an Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI). An ORI evaluates a unit in a deployed combat environment.

A stringent operational readiness inspection at South Carolina’s McEntire Joint National Guard Base validated the “force multiplying” partnership between one of the Air National Guard’s premier fighter wings and the Active Air Force.

The South Carolina Air National Guard’s 169th Fighter Wing, the largest “active associate” fighter wing in the Air Force, solidified its reputation as a groundbreaking contributor to the U.S. military’s Total Force initiative.

“This Air Combat Command/Air National Guard first will add to the long, rich history of McEntire and continue the unit tradi-

tion of being a source of pride for the Air National Guard,” stated Air National Guard Maj. Gen. Emmett R. Titshaw in a memo to 169th FW Commander Co. Scott Williams.

SCANG’s project began in 2005 when the 169th was chosen by the Base Realignment and Closure Commission to receive 10 additional aircraft, bringing the number of fighter jets in McEntire’s arsenal to 28, making it the largest operational F-16 wing in the Guard.

In 2007, the base made Air Force history by initiating a record-level infusion of Active Air Force members into its operations. Whereas previous active associations – often called “com-

munity basing” – involved a couple pilots at a time, McEntire eventually would gain nine additional pilots and more than 140 maintenance experts ... all active duty.

The South Carolina program flip-flops the Air Force’s typical associations in Virginia and Utah, which sent Guard and Reserve members to train on active-duty installations.

Instead, blending active-duty Airmen with the Guard base’s 1,200 citizen soldiers yields a number of strategic and cost-saving advantages.

“We knew from the very beginning that this was history in the making ... the first of many large scale fighter associations that will play an integral role in the future of the U.S. Air Force,” said Lt. Col. Keith Miller, the wing’s project officer for the active association since its implementation.

The concept leverages the deep experience levels and proficiency of Air Guard units to help active-duty Airmen learn their jobs at a quickened pace, Miller said.

After all, this key component of Total Force integration was launched in response to critical challenges faced by the Air Force’s fighter force, not the least of which is a shortage of

experienced pilots and available cockpits.

Miller said McEntire typically has played host to three or four pilots from other bases – often overseas installations like Spangdahlen and Aviano Air Bases – for up to six weeks at a time.

“Thanks to our own pilots’ experience levels, visiting pilots always have been able to get higher-quality upgrades here,” Miller said. “In fact, they still do. That tradition continues in addition to the active associate program.”

The active association enables a Guard unit like the SCANG to conduct 120-day deployments overseas without tag-teaming or “rainbowing” with other units.

Bolstered by active-duty members who can be expected to deploy for the entire 120 days, the unit can rotate traditional Guard members into the theater for 40 days at a time and be self-sustaining for an entire combat rotation.

Without the active associate makeover, the Air Force would depend on at least two other Guard units – about 2,000 service members – to pull off the same mission. The McEntire program is tailored to the specific number necessary for such a rotation, and its structure allows the SCANG to send a dozen jets into the theater.

“Our active association is designed to provide the maximum combat capability and deployability for the lowest cost, in terms of money and manpower,” Miller said. “By adding just 150 Active Air Force folks to our team, we actually have triple the capability of any other fighter unit in the Guard. In fact, we easily approach the operational capacity of most active-duty units ... with fighters that tend to be in much better condition.”

Considering that there are five fewer F-16 units in the Air Force than two years ago but just as many mission requirements, these added capabilities and strategic efficiencies are hard to ignore.

“Our planes and experience levels plus the extra manpower from the Active Air Force equals increased ‘access to the iron’ for the Department of Defense at an extremely reasonable cost,” Miller said.

For this reason, four more large-scale active associate programs are ramping up in Alabama, Florida, Texas and Vermont.

So how does a traditional Guard installation provide the quality-of-life enhancements and support programs full-timers expect from a typical active duty Air Force base? That’s what Technical Sgt. Shawn Blair wanted to know.

The aerospace ground equipment craftsman recently moved to South Carolina from Cannon Air Force Base in New Mexico.

“Obviously, it’s unlike any assignment I’ve had in my 15 years in the Air Force,” Blair said. “But, as soon as friends familiar with McEntire heard I was coming here, they told me they were envious of the fact I was joining this team.”

The logistics of an active associate assignment to McEntire are simplified because the active duty 20th Fighter Wing is less than 30 miles away at Shaw Air Force Base. Thanks to a memorandum of understanding between the neighboring fighter wings, active duty Airmen assigned to detachments at McEntire are supported administratively by Shaw.

“The memorandum of understanding between the two bases makes it work,” Miller said. “It clarifies the ‘operational direction’ for our active duty folks and it obviously eliminates many logistical and administrative hang-ups.”

With just a few facility modifications at McEntire, the active



US Air Force photo by Master Sergeant Joe Smith, 169th Fighter Wing/PA

Master Sergeant Chris Wimberly, from the 169th Security Forces Squadron (SFS) at McEntire Joint National Guard Base (JNGB), South Carolina, prepares security around the convoy with the 169th Civil Engineer Squadron (CES). Upon arrival to Base X, during a Phase II Operational Readiness Inspection (ORI), the 169th CES and SFS execute a convoy and secure the perimeter where personnel will be operating. McEntire Airmen are (simulated) deployed to the base and are being evaluated during a Phase II ORI. The ORI evaluates a unit’s war-fighting capabilities in a deployed, combat environment.



USAF Photo by MSgt Marvin R. Preston

Airmen from the 169th Fighter Wing, McEntire Joint National Guard Base, South Carolina process through the CCA (Contamination Control Area) during a Phase II Operational Readiness Evaluation (ORE). The Phase II ORE evaluates a unit’s ability to launch missions in a chemical combat environment. The 169th is home of the Swamp Foxes of the South Carolina Air National Guard.

associates now are fully integrated into the wing's operations, maintenance and support groups, and work seamlessly alongside the SCANG's full-time and traditional members. According to Miller, McEntire's new active-duty denizens and the expanded arsenal of F-16s "more or less doubled the base's full-time manning," so some accommodations had to be made.

With funding from the BRAC and the strategic utilization of "Sustainment, Restoration and Modernization" dollars, McEntire created additional mission planning and briefing areas, an expanded crew chief work area and flight line tool room and even a fitness facility.

Though most of the SCANG's active associates live "on the economy," about 30 of the younger, single Airmen live in dorms at Shaw. They have their own first sergeant, room inspections and all the other aspects of barracks life. They're transported to and from their McEntire duty stations by leased vans.

"McEntire is quite possibly the best assignment in the Air Force," Blair said. "I'm proud to be part of an initiative that

is shaping the future of combat operations throughout the Air Force."

These sentiments are common among the active duty members who have entered into this cutting-edge collaboration with the SCANG, according to Wing Commander Williams.

"I am convinced our achievements during the ORI are the result of this incredible spirit of cooperation, and a partnership that allows us to far exceed the capabilities of a typical Guard unit," Williams said. "It's how we launched almost 50 percent more sorties than a typical guard unit during the exercise."

Once the approximately 70 inspectors concluded their evaluation of the unit in December, inspection team chief Col. George Duda said, "The inspection overall was one of the best fighter Phase II inspections ... active duty or Guard ... seen in over three years."

According to SCANG leaders, the wing's excellent overall grade is largely attributable to their outstanding combat employment rating.

"More than one inspector remarked to me that he found it impossible to tell the

difference between our active duty and traditional Guard members," Williams said. "We are one."

Declared mission-ready for a 120-day combat rotation, the 169th has its sights set on a 2010 deployment, but is ready for tasking at any time. In the meantime, the base is ramping up for an Air and Ground Expo in October.

The senior leadership also remains focused on preparing the base in the long term for the arrival of the Air Force's newest fighter, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. In October, 2006 the Air Force announced that McEntire would be one of the initial operational locations to base F-35s, along with Hill AFB, Utah, Kadena Air Base, Japan, and Shaw AFB, SC.

"Active associate units like ours are ideally suited for the new fighter," Miller said. "Our unique partnership with the active duty will allow us to provide combatant commanders with greater access to and utilization of the new fighter without overburdening our traditional Guard members. Once again, it's about increased combat capability at a very low cost to the taxpayer." **AF**

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