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US Edition
Vol. 8, No. 2

\$7.25US \$8.99CAN



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BRAC SPECIAL

report and photos: Frank B. Mormillo

The KC-135R Stratotanker was the last manned aircraft to be operated by the 'Grizzlies' of the California Air National Guard. This example of a 163rd ARW Stratotanker is 59-1505. Ted Carlsson/Fotodynamics



All change for the GRIZZLIES

From fighters, recce and tankers to UAVs

The 'Grizzlies' of the California Air National Guard have, over the years, performed many front-line roles - they have been a fighter, fighter-bomber, recce and tanker outfit, but now a BRAC decision has led to perhaps its biggest ever change of purpose. The unit still has pilots, but they no longer sit in its aircraft...

The future is here, and this is the future; said Col Al Aimar, commander of the 163rd Air Refueling Wing (the 'Grizzlies'), when he unveiled the wing's new mission to its personnel at March Air Reserve Base, CA. A pilot-in-the-cockpit flying unit of the California Air National Guard since May 24, 1946, the air refueling wing was re-designed the 163rd Reconnaissance Wing in June 2006 as a result of a BRAC decision and its fliers are now 'piloting' General Atomics MQ-1

Predator medium-altitude, long-endurance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) by remote control from computer consoles on the ground. 'People are going to be looking at us - the first Guard unit to stand up a Predator mission; Aimar added.

The 'Grizzlies' actually trace their history back to May 1943 when the unit was constituted for activation as the 411th Fighter Squadron of the 343rd Fighter Group, 9th Air Force, with the activation taking place at Westover Field, MA, on

August 15, 1943. After flying P-47 Thunderbolts in combat from May 1944 to May 1945, the unit was inactivated at Mitchell Field, NY on November 7, 1945 and then reconstituted as the 196th Fighter Squadron for allocation to the California National Guard on May 24, 1946.

Initially based at the San Bernardino Air Material Area (later Norton AFB) with a complement of two AT-6 Texans and two L-5 Sentinels, the 'Grizzlies' finally got P-51 D Mustangs to resume the fighter mission in February 1947. Re-equipped with F-80C Shooting Stars in June 1948, the outfit became the first Air National Guard jet fighter unit. Called up for active duty on October 10, 1950 because of the Korean War, the unit was re-designated the 196th Fighter Bomber Squadron and moved to George AFB, CA on November 1, 1950. Between January and June 1951, several of the



196th's Shooting Stars, along with pilots and support personnel, were sent to Eniwetok to provide air defense during Operation 'Greenhouse' nuclear tests.

After converting to the F-84E Thunderjet in April 1951, the 'Grizzlies' moved to Japan as part of the 116th Fighter Bomber Wing, arriving at Misawa AB on July 25, 1951. Following combat operations from Misawa and Chitose AB, Japan, as well as Taegu AB in Korea, the 196th returned to state control at

Ontario International Airport, CA on July 10, 1952, but was not activated until January 1, 1953, after being re-equipped with F-51 H Mustangs. In March 1954, it was re-designated the 196th Fighter Interceptor Squadron and began to re-equip with F-86A Sabre jets. The 'Grizzlies' were accorded group status as the 163rd Fighter Interceptor Group on May 12, 1958 and became part of Air Defense Command on July 1, 1960.

Subsequently, the 'Grizzlies' began to fly radar-equipped F-86L Sabres in February 1961 and F/TF-102A Delta Daggers in May 1965. On March 8, 1975, the 'Grizzlies' entered into what some considered a purgatory of sorts when the unit was re-assigned to Tactical Air Command and gave up its jet fighters for Cessna O-2A Super Skymasters to become the 196th Tactical Air Support Squadron. Moved to March AFB in the summer of 1982, the 'Grizzlies' finally got back into jets again as



top: As the 196th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, 163rd Fighter Interceptor Group, the 'Grizzlies' operated F/TF-102A Delta Daggers from Ontario International Airport from May 1965 until March 1975.

left: A 196th TFS, 163rd TFG F-4C Phantom II air refueling from an AFRES KC-135 Stratotanker over Arizona in March 1985.





the 196th Tactical Fighter Squadron when they re-equipped with F-4C Phantom IIs on October 1, 1982. Conversion to the F-4E Phantom II followed in the spring of 1987 - then, on July 1, 1990, another name change occurred, this time to the 196th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron after re-equipping with RF-4C Phantom IIs. On March 15, 1992, the unit became the 196th Reconnaissance Squadron of the 163rd Reconnaissance Group.

After 11 years and 30,000 flying hours in the Phantom II jet fighters, another change of mission saw the 'Grizzlies' being re-equipped with KC-135E and later KC-135R Stratotankers to become the 163rd Air Refueling Wing. While the change in mission was not particularly popular with many of the fighter pilots, it was welcomed by the other personnel who finally had

opportunities for other flying jobs and familiarization rides.

Onwards with the Predator

As an air refueling unit, the 'Grizzlies' operated up to nine KC-135 Stratotankers at a time, while 24 aircraft were assigned in the unit's days with the Phantom II. With an authorised personnel strength of 859 for the air refueling mission, the wing has gained an additional 20-25 slots for its new Predator tasking. Although some personnel planned to move to other units or retire, most seemed prepared to adapt to the change when it occurred.

Reportedly, there was due to be a job for everyone who wanted to stay on, with the major concern being to bring affected personnel up to speed on the new role as quickly as possible. Before the change was

above left: F-4C Phantom II 63-553 making a low pass over March AFB.

above: In July 1990, the 'Grizzlies' re-equipped with the RF-4C Phantom II to become the 196th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, 163rd Tactical Reconnaissance Group. One of the unit's RF-4Cs is pictured at March AFB when the facility was an active duty base known as 'Tanker Town, USA'.

accomplished, 11 crews of pilots (22 in all) and nine maintainers were working through the Predator Basic Instructor Course, the goal being for the wing to eventually provide itself with most of the training required. Wing pilots must attend a two-week Joint Firepower Course at Nellis AFB, NV, before going on to the 98-day Predator Basic Course at Creech AFB, NV. After that, they return to Nellis for 60 to 90 days where they complete actual missions under



A pair of 'Grizzlies' F-4C Phantom IIs ready to take off from the March AFB runway on a training mission in March 1985.

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left: By April and May 2006, the 'Grizzlies' were winding down their mission with the KC-135R Stratotanker as the 163rd Air Refuelling Wing. These were the last two 'KCs' operated by the unit at March ARB.

below: Col Randy Ball (left), 163rd ARW Operations Group Commander, and Maj Keith Ward at the controls of a 'Grizzlies' KC-135R Stratotanker during one of the unit's last air refueling missions.

bottom: For the 'Grizzlies', the post-BRAC future now lies with the General Atomics MO-1 Predator which has a primary reconnaissance function and a secondary strike mission. The unit was re-designated the 163rd Reconnaissance Wing in June 2006.

observation. Flying crews consist of two pilots, one who handles take-offs and landings and the other who flies the actual missions. According to Col Aimar, the unit may initially be 20 pilots short of its anticipated need.

Although the actual control of the wing's Predators will be from March ARB, most of the aircraft and their maintainers will actually be stationed at the old George AFB, CA, site because the FAA has not yet cleared Predators to fly over populated areas. At any one time, one of the MQ-1 will also be deployed overseas.

Already a seasoned combat veteran, the MQ-1 Predator is a reconnaissance platform with the ability to also strike targets with a pair of Hellfire guided missiles. In the year from mid-2005 to mid-2006, Nellis-based Predators from the 15th Reconnaissance Squadron took part in 222 separate raids, during which they engaged in 145 force protection actions, fired 32 Hellfire missiles, surveyed 18,000 targets and flew 1,800 sorties involving more than 70,000 flying hours. The 'Grizzlies' are already looking forward to the day when they will supplement the MQ-1 Predator with the bigger and more capable MQ-9 Reaper, the 'hunter/killer' version of the Predator, which will be able to carry as many as eight Hellfire missiles along with a pair of guided bombs and two AIM-9 Sidewinder air-to-air missiles. 'It will have the capability of the A-10,' said Maj Keith Ward, a KC-135 pilot who has been through the transition to the Predator.

Although the 'Grizzlies' had been winding down their air refueling mission for months (the unit was down to a pair of operational Stratotankers by May 2006), those operations did actually continue right up to the time that the final Stratotanker departed for its new home with the Tennessee Air National Guard last June. There was no official farewell ceremony for the unit's last KC-135 - a low-key end to the unit's period operating manned aircraft, but indicative of the fact that it hasn't disappeared completely.



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