



FACT SHEET

U.S. Air National Guard Fact Sheet

117TH AIR REFUELING WING - HISTORY

The 117th Air Refueling Wing began life as the 117th Fighter Group, a re-designation of the 354th Operations Group in 1946. The 354th Operations Group was active in the Pacific theater during World War II. Ten years later, the 117th would be retroactively designated the 117th Tactical Reconnaissance Group so that the 354th Operations Group could be reactivated as a regular unit. The 117th Air Refueling Wing is based at the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport in Birmingham, Alabama. Units at the wing include the 117th Operations Group, the 117th Medical Group, the 117th Maintenance Group, the 117th Mission Support Group, the 99th Air Refueling Squadron, the 106th Air Refueling Squadron and the 117th Intelligence Squadron.

The 106th Air Refueling Squadron traces its roots back to World War I, when it was first organized as the 106th Aero Squadron. It was deactivated following the war and reformed as the Birmingham Flying Club, also known as the Birmingham Escadrille at Roberts Field in 1919. The Birmingham Flying Club then gained federal recognition as the 135th Observation Squadron in 1922, and was the first Air National Guard Unit in Alabama. In January 1924, it was re-designated the 106th Observation Squadron. By 1930, the facilities at Roberts Field were considered to be inadequate and a campaign began to build a new home in Birmingham. By 1938, the squadron moved into its current location at Birmingham Municipal Airport. In 1940, the 106th was ordered to active duty and participated in numerous missions in World War II, including anti-submarine patrols, combat observation and bombardment. During this time it was briefly re-designated as the 100th Bombardment Squadron, but in 1946th was re-activated and re-designated as the 106th Bombardment Squadron, returning to the Alabama National Guard.

The 117th Tactical Reconnaissance Group went to active service to serve in the Korean War in 1950. There, it first elevated from group to wing status and deployed RF-84s on reconnaissance and photography missions, returning in 1952 and downgrading back to group level. In 1961, the group was federalized again with the 106th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron deploying to France for air support during the Berlin Crisis.

Approximately 80 members of the 117th Tactical Reconnaissance Group took leave from their unit from 1960 to 1961 for a covert CIA operation later known as the Bay of Pigs invasion. Personnel volunteered as B-26 bomber advisors to the Cuban Liberation Air Force in an attempt to invade Cuba and depose Fidel Castro. They also participated in aerial support in B-26 formations, as an act of solidarity with their Cuban trainees. Four 117th personnel died when communist forces shot down two B-26 bombers on April 19, 1961. All participants were sworn to secrecy until the mission was declassified in 1998.

The 117th was expanded to a wing, now known as the 117th Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, in 1974 with the addition of the 117th Combat Support Group, 117th Medical Group and 117th Maintenance Group. In 1990, the 117 TRW sent RF-4Cs and personnel from the 106th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron to the United Arab Emirates, where they conducted surveillance in support of Operation Desert Shield. This was the last major operation before the RF-4C would be phased out and the wing would begin a new mission.

In 1994, the wing was designated the 117th Air Refueling Wing. The RF-4Cs were sent to retirement and replaced with KC-135R Stratotankers. The refueling mission continues to this day. On September 14, 2001, the refueling mission was employed in Operation Noble Eagle. In the aftermath of the terror attacks on 9/11, the wing's participation in this operation included refueling F-15 and F-16 aircraft in Combat Air

Patrol missions over major cities in the Southeastern USA to prevent further terror attacks. The wing was mobilized in October 2001, for one year flying refueling missions from Incirlik AB, Turkey in support of Operations Enduring Freedom in the Global War on Terror. In March 2003, the wing was again mobilized to Al Udeid AB, Qatar and flew combat missions in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom.

The 117th Air Refueling Wing remains heavily engaged and deployed at the highest rates in unit history in support of contingency operations globally in addition to its 24/7 support of the nuclear enterprise.

