

"OPERATION CREEK PARTY, 1967-1977"

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On May 1, 1967, Colonel (later Brigadier General) Nowell D. Didear launched his lumbering KC-97L tanker on a mission over Baumholder, Germany. Didear commanded the Texas Air National Guard's (ANG's) 136th Air Refueling Wing (ARW). The mission -- which lasted nearly four hours, off-loaded 14,000 pounds of jet fuel to F-100s from the United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) -- inaugurated Operation Creek Party. During that period, hardly a weekday passed when ANG KC-97Ls were not airborne over Europe from Rhein Main Air Base, Germany. Air refueling and Operation Creek Party pioneered a new dimension of what became known as the total force by using contingents of Air Guard volunteers and full-time Guard personnel to support active duty Air Force operational and training requirements overseas in peacetime for an extended period. It extended a new model for the training and employment of the air reserve components that had gradually emerged after the Korean War. Instead of limiting their peacetime activities to training and equipping for wartime mobilization, Air Guard and Air Force Reserve (AFRES) units were increasingly being called upon to support active duty Air Force requirements as byproducts of their training. That practice began in 1953 with selected Air Guard fighter units augmenting the Air Defense Command's runway alert program with volunteers and aircraft at their home stations. It subsequently spread to the aeromedical airlift, strategic airlift, special

In 1960, the Air Guard was predominantly a fighter force with a sprinkling of strategic and aeromedical airlift as well as a handful of special operations units. However, members of its senior leadership were convinced that "Broadening the Air National Guard missions is essential. Concentrating the missions of the Guard to only a limited area of our defense requirements creates a very vulnerable situation to program changes. A well-balanced Air National Guard with missions in all areas of the defense requirements, is a sound goal."¹ With a broader portfolio of Air Force flying missions, Guard leaders believed that their organization would be far less vulnerable to technological, doctrinal and strategic changes that might render their units obsolete. In essence, they would help to save flags by broadening their spectrum of flying missions to include air refueling and strategic airlift.

Air refueling was added to the Air Guard's expanding portfolio of flying missions in the early 1960s. Unlike airlift and special operations missions which had been acquired largely as a result of Guard initiatives, the original impetus to participate that mission apparently came from the active force. It was an outgrowth of Operation "Big Slam/Puerto Rico" conducted during March and April 1960 to test the ability of the Military Air Transport Service (MATS) and U.S. Army troops to respond quickly to an overseas contingency.²

One of the lessons drawn from "Big Slam/Puerto Rico" had been the importance of moving massive amounts of fuel to forward locations. MATS and the U.S. Continental Army Command had recommended in 1960 that KC-97s should be transferred to the Air Guard and the AFRES once they became excess to the needs

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of the Air Force as the latter phased in its new jet-powered KC-135 tankers. The air reserve components could use those aging tankers to assist in transporting aviation fuel overseas. The KC-135's primary mission was to support the Strategic Air Command's (SAC's) nuclear-armed bomber force. It gradually replaced the Air Force's obsolescent fleet of piston-powered KC-97s and KB-50s.

Later that year, a subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee endorsed the recommendation that some tankers surplus to active duty Air Force needs should be placed in the reserve forces. The Air Force Association's Air National Guard Council also formed a special committee to study airlift requirements in 1960. Its study, which was widely circulated to Congress, the Department of Defense, and the Air Force advocated a large buildup of airlift capacity in both the active force and the reserve components. The study also suggested that some ANG units be should given KC-97 tankers to train for aerial refueling so that capability would be readily available to the organization's fighter aircraft during overseas deployments.

Consequently, the Air Guard received its first KC-97 aerial tankers between July and August 1961. During that period, the 108th Fighter Interceptor Squadron (FIS), Illinois, 126th FIS, Wisconsin, and 145th ATS, Ohio converted to KC-97s and were redesignated air refueling squadrons.³ According to the Department of Defense (DoD), four major factors drove the selection of Guard fighter units converting to tankers. The first was the Air Force's increasing requirements for the refueling mission. Second was the adequacy of the Guard's existing airfield facilities to handle the KC-97s. Next, the locations of those airfields had to be appropriate to that mission. Finally, the age and

maintainability of existing Guard fighter aircraft was a major consideration in the selection process.

For reasons that remain unclear, the primary mission of the new ANG tanker units was changed to supporting training and overseas deployments of the Guard's own tactical fighter units. In addition, the DoD announced that the ANG's KC-97s would train with Tactical Air Command (TAC) fighter squadrons and could also refuel SAC's nuclear-armed bombers. The latter mission never actually materialized because of the growing availability of new KC-135s in the active force. The Air Force's new jet-powered tankers were much faster and could offload significantly more fuel than the KC-97s. The "flexible response" military strategy of President John F. Kennedy's administration and the Guard's desire to equip its existing flying units with the most modern aircraft available, encouraged a significant number of conversions to tanker and strategic airlift aircraft during the remainder of the 1960s.⁴

On August 30, 1961, President Kennedy ordered 148,000 Guardsmen and Reservists to active duty in response to Soviet moves to cut off allied access to Berlin. The Air Guard's share of that call-up was 21,067 individuals. Most of them reported to their units on October 1st. Units mobilized that month included 18 tactical fighter squadrons, 4 tactical reconnaissance squadrons, 6 air transport squadrons, and a tactical control group. On November 1st, the Air Force mobilized three ANG fighter interceptor squadrons. In late October and early November, eight of the tactical fighter units flew to Europe with their 216 aircraft in Operation Stair Step, the largest jet deployment in the Air Guard's history. Because they were neither equipped nor trained and equipped for aerial refueling, they had to island-hop across the Atlantic Ocean. In a

tribute to their airmanship and maintenance, all of the deploying Air Guardsmen arrived safely on the continent without a single accident or aircraft loss. Due to their short range, 60 Air Guard F-104 interceptors were airlifted to Europe in late November. Meanwhile, the Air Guard's new air refueling units remained unmobilized at their home stations continuing their conversion training.⁵

Although publicly lauded for their performance by senior Air Force officers including Gen. Curtis LeMay, the Berlin mobilization revealed serious shortcomings in the ANG. Basically, it had not been trained and equipped as a force capable of immediate global deployment and integration with the active duty Air Force in a broad spectrum of military scenarios ranging from a general war with the Soviet Union to low level counterinsurgencies or "brush fire wars" as such conflicts were called in the early 1960s. Instead, the Air Guard was still a World War II-style "mobilization day" force that required substantial training, personnel augmentation, and additional equipment after it was called into federal service. The Air Force lacked plans and adequate stocks of spare parts to integrate Air Guard units in situations short of a general war.

Air Guard units had been limited by Defense Department policy to 83 percent of their wartime organizational strength before the Berlin call-up. That gap was filled by mobilizing approximately 3,000 AFRES individual "fillers." Air Guard pilots, although considered excellent individual flyers, had to be trained quickly for transoceanic flight, and crash landings at sea. During the summer and fall of 1961, Air Guard units also had to respond to frequent changes in personnel manning documents by the Air Force. For all those reasons, Guard units mobilized in 1961 required extensive training, additional equipment, and reorganization once they were called into federal service. After

deploying to Europe, the fighter units which had been trained to deliver tactical nuclear weapons, had to be retrained for conventional operations. The Guardsmen were based at World War II era airfields that had to be refurbished to accommodate their jet fighter aircraft.⁶

The Air Guard's growing fleet of KC-97s had a significant impact on its training and global mobility after the Berlin crisis. To demonstrate the effectiveness of a program to improve the readiness and mobility deficiencies of ANG fighter units revealed during the 1961 mobilization, the tankers refueled 12 RF-84s of Alabama's 117th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron (TRS) during a 3,500 mile, 8-hour, non-stop flight to Alaska in August 1963.⁷ A year later, 28 ANG KC-97s refueled 19 ANG F-100s and 12 RF-84s during Operation Ready Go, the Air Guard's first major overseas training deployment to Europe. They were supported by 30 transports from 16 different ANG airlift units. Air Guard fighters and reconnaissance aircraft took approximately 9 hours to cross the Atlantic and were ready to begin flying training missions in Germany within 45 minutes of their arrival at Ramstein Air Base during Ready Go. That was in marked contrast to Stair Step which had taken Guard aircraft approximately a week to deploy the entire contingent across that ocean and a good deal longer to make them combat ready once they arrived at their European bases.⁸

Operation Ready Go also provided an early test of a proposed tanker modification sponsored by the 126th Air Refueling Wing (ARW) of the Illinois ANG. The 126th had taken jet engines from KB-50 tankers, then being phased out of the Air Force inventory, and added them to KC-97s to augment the power of their four piston engines. The tests of those modified KC-97s were successful. Large numbers of jet-augmented tankers, designated KC-97Ls, served in the Air

Guard until 1978. The jets prolonged the service life of the KC-97s' conventional engines and enabled the aircraft to safely refuel advanced Air Force fighters like the F-4 because of the tankers' increased speed.⁹

In August 1961, the 126th had begun flying refueling missions in KC-97s. TAC, the gaining command for Air Guard tankers at that time, wanted them to become increasingly involved in refueling its new fighters. But, takeoffs and landings of fully loaded KC-97Gs in hot and humid weather were extremely dangerous. If an engine failed, aircrews had to jettison the tanker's externally mounted auxiliary fuel tanks to stay airborne. That was unthinkable because most ANG tanker units were based at municipal airports adjacent to heavily populated business and residential areas. Without a more reliable aircraft, the future of the Air Guard's tanker mission and the continued existence of those units was questionable.

After a rash of KC-97 engine failures, 1st Lieutenant Philip A. Meyer, an aeronautical engineer and full-time technician assigned to the 126th, suggested a solution to the problem. He proposed that the ANG augment its tankers with jet engines. The Air Force's jet-augmented KB-50 tankers were being phased out and melted down for scrap. The nearly identical wing designs of the two aircraft made it feasible to transfer the KB-50's J-47 jet engines to the KC-97. After his unit convinced the NGB and the Air Force that the concept had merit, two J-47 jet engines were added to a KC-97. The modified aircraft was service tested by the 126th. The jet-augmented tanker performed well. The new engines increased the tanker's altitude capability from about 15,000 feet to 30,000 feet and increased its speed by 30 knots. The tanker's takeoff roll distance was cut in half.

But, the Bureau was unable to win support for modifying its entire fleet of KC-97s until TAC identified its wartime tanker needs. Its opportunity came in mid-1963 when Gen. Walter C. Sweeney, Jr., TAC's commander, swung his support behind the Air Guard's proposal because of SAC's inability to meet his command's wartime air refueling requirements. The prototype KC-97 cost \$67,000 to modify. The Guard budgeted approximately \$2,405,000 to convert its entire fleet of 65 tankers.¹⁰

With a safer and more efficient tanker in their inventory, Air Guardsmen began searching for a more significant mission for the KC-97L. They looked to Europe where the Air Force had concentrated large numbers of high performance fighter aircraft to deal with the threat posed by the Soviets and their Warsaw Pact allies during the Cold War. SAC continued to focus its tankers on supporting the command's nuclear-armed bombers. Increasingly, the bulk of the command's remaining KC-135s were involved in the war in Southeast Asia, significantly reducing the number of air refueling missions that could be flown in Europe.

The tanker shortage and the withdrawal of France from active military participation in North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had a dramatic negative impact on the United States Air Forces in Europe's (USAFE's) fighter training programs. Due to the French decision on NATO, the Air Force had been told to evacuate its bases in that nation by 1967. Consequently, Air Force tactical fighter units in Europe faced a serious problem. Access to airspace over southern Europe was seriously hampered by the complex political situation and the limited availability of airfields in the region. Both Switzerland and

Austria prohibited overflights by NATO tactical aircraft.

Although the French continued to routinely approve routing American military aircraft through their territory to avoid Switzerland, fighters had to carry drop tanks and refuel in northern Italy if their destinations were further south. But, USAFE discovered that Aviano Air Base, Italy could not handle the greatly increased transit traffic. As a result, a considerable number of training missions to Greece, Turkey, and Italy had to be canceled in early 1967. Unpredictable weather over central Europe exacerbated the problem. In addition, USAFE was faced with a growing shortage of experienced pilots because of the escalating demands of the Vietnam War. All of those factors reduced the command's combat readiness. ¹¹

To help alleviate those problems, the Air Force had turned to the Air Guard. The Chief of Staff, Gen. John P. McConnell, suggested that USAFE use Air Guard tankers to overcome its air refueling shortfalls. Before accepting that proposal, USAFE planned and implemented a series of F-4 and KC-97L refueling compatibility tests over Germany during February 1967. The tests involved one tanker from General Didear's wing and another from the 126th Air Refueling Wing, Illinois Air National Guard, plus F-4s from USAFE's 36th and 50th Tactical Fighter Wings. Altogether, they flew 9 tanker and 24 fighter sorties. The tests included both "dry" and "wet" hookups at altitudes of 26,000 to 29,000 feet with indicated airspeeds of 210 to 220 knots.

According to Lieutenant Colonel Robert D. Brown, an Air Force Officer assigned to the National Guard Bureau (NGB) who had observed the operation, USAFE personnel were initially " . . . very pessimistic about the success of

this compatibility test. The pessimism stemmed from previous experience (nominal in some cases) in joint KC-97/F-4 tests. As the test progressed, with success being observed in each sortie, the pessimism changed to optimism concerning the probability and feasibility of expanded and extended operations."¹² Conventionally powered KC-97s had refueled F-4s and other Air Force fighters stateside before USAFE organized those compatibility tests. The command's primary concern was its lack of experience with the jet-augmented KC-97L, an aircraft that was peculiar to the Air Guard.¹³

Based on the successful tests, representatives of USAFE, the NGB as well as the 126th and 136th Air Refueling Wings developed a Creek Party operations plan in early 1967. It required five ANG air refueling groups from Illinois, Texas, Tennessee, Ohio, and Wisconsin to undertake sustained operations in Europe. Most refuelings would be scheduled for Monday through Friday during daylight hours. Some night operations would also be scheduled. The planners expected the Creek Party aircraft to conduct three sorties a day. A backup bird would be available to launch from Rhine Main if the primary mission bird could not complete scheduled sorties or if emergency refuelings were required. Typically, a KC-97L would refuel four to eight fighters on each sortie.

The number of participating Air Guard groups increased to 9 between 1969 and 1972 with a total inventory of 75 KC-97Ls as more units converted to tankers.* Originally, Creek Party was expected to last for just a year then it was extended for a second year. Creek Party was extended on a year by year

* Units participating in Creek Party included the: 171st Air Refueling Wing (ARW), Pennsylvania; 160th Air Refueling Group (ARG), Ohio; 151st ARG, Utah; 126th ARW, Illinois; 128th ARG, Wisconsin; 139th ARG, Missouri; 136th ARW,

basis because the Vietnam War lasted much longer than the Air Force had expected and there were not enough active force KC-135s available to meet all of USAFE's air refueling requirements.

USAFE was initially skeptical about whether or not their tankers could mesh well into the command's complex flying operations that involved assigned corridors, buffer zones, and prohibited areas. Many of those restricted areas were located in close proximity to dangerous Warsaw Pact airspace. USAFE also wondered whether or not the Air Guard could sustain its commitment over the long haul. In a broader sense, its doubts may have stemmed from the command's lack of operational experience with Guardsmen on a regular basis.

After Operation Ready Go, regular short-term deployments of ANG fighter units to Europe for training did not begin until after the Vietnam War ended and the total force policy was implemented. Furthermore, most Guardsmen were part-time airmen who served in Creek Party on a voluntary basis. Volunteerism was an untested and dubious concept for the active force. To the extent that anyone had planned for it, volunteerism was probably viewed by both the Air Guard and the Air Force as a stopgap measure between routine peacetime training and mobilization for war. Regardless of its concerns, USAFE desperately needed more tankers to support its fighter training program and was willing to experiment. The command's doubts about Creek Party were gradually overcome by the performance of Air Guard tanker units in Europe.¹⁴

Volunteer crews and aircraft from the 136th ARW launched the first Creek Party sortie from Rhine Main Air Base, Germany on April 28, 1967. The NGB

Texas; 134th ARG, Tennessee; and 161st ARG Arizona.

planned to have each unit provide about 90 personnel and 5 to 8 aircraft for a month. Because 75 percent of Air Guardsmen were traditional part-time members of the reserve forces, they would only stay in Germany for about 15 days each - the length of their annual mandatory active duty training period. They were then replaced by another group of personnel from the same unit. A unit's aircraft remained at Rhine Main for the entire 38 days. At the end of that period, another Air Guard unit assumed responsibility for the operation at Rhine Main. During the second year of the operation, a 15-day rotation policy was adopted probably because some of the units had trouble maintaining the deployment for 38 days.

Guardsmen either borrowed support equipment from the Air Force at Rhine Main or provided them from their own unit stocks. Since active force C-97s and KC-97s were being out of the Air Force inventory,* Air Guardsmen depended heavily upon their own logistical resources to support the operation in Germany. They carried many spare parts and extra engines to Germany aboard their own aircraft when they deployed overseas. The Air Force provided aviation gasoline, lubricants, and some parts from its own supply system. Virtually all maintenance was conducted outdoors by Air Guardsmen since hangar space was not available to them. A small permanent party of Guardsmen at Rhine Main maintained the continuity between Guard units and USAFE. They also made sure adequate supplies, spare parts and facilities were available at the base to support the year-round operation.

Initially, the KC-97Ls refueled Air Force fighters on an oval race-track

* The last C/KC-97s were retired from the Air Force inventory in 1973.

pattern located at 18,000 to 19,000 feet above Baumholder, Germany, about a 30-minute flight from Rhine-Main. Later, those operations were extended to refueling tracks over Belgium, the English Channel, the Dutch coast, and Denmark's west coast. Air Guardsmen also flew special refueling sorties over Italy, Spain, and the Arctic Circle.

While refueling missions were ordinarily flown by a single tanker, there was always a backup aircraft ready to take its place. Aerial hookups could be challenging. Rain and snow were frequent companions to the aircrews. Although the KC-97Ls could operate in such weather, it sometimes grounded Air Force fighters forcing missions to be scrubbed. In order to refuel the high-performance F-4s, a KC-97L had to go into a shallow dive at full power with its two jets and four conventional engines while the fighters slowed down nearly to stall speed.

Creek Party was the Air Guard's first major sustained overseas volunteer rotation. Because it was an actual operation that involved deployments to Europe, not just routine training around the flag poles at their home stations, Creek Party was popular with members of participating units. Commanders of the 126th ARW and 136th ARW, for example, made certain that all ground support personnel had opportunities to participate in the deployments regardless of their job assignments and skill levels. Approximately 67 percent of Air Guardsmen were veterans of the active force. Recruiting and retention in Air Guard units became especially challenging after the end of the draft in 1973. The pool of non-prior service applicants dried up virtually over night. Although apparently no studies were conducted of Creek Party's actual impact, Air Guard were convinced that it had a strong positive impact on recruiting and

retention.¹⁵

Creek Party significantly improved USAFE's fighter training picture. The command discovered that Air Guard tankers increased the operational flexibility of its tactical units during bad weather months and expanded training opportunities for units in the United Kingdom. Fighter-bombers based in the latter could fly close air support missions to southern Germany because of the availability of additional air refueling. Air combat tactics training could be performed more realistically than before because combat aircraft no longer had to fly with external fuel tanks. The operation's early successes encouraged USAFE to initiate a study called "Aheadness" in 1967. It " . . . concluded that flying safety and training efficiency in Europe could be greatly enhanced by integrating air refueling with daily operations as a standard flight-plan procedure. . . . In March 1969, the project was again presented to the [Air Force] Chief of Staff, and HQ USAF endorsed it [after they had rejected it due to Vietnam tanker commitments]. . . . In June [1969], the Air National Guard responded to a USAFE request by increasing KC-97L support from three to four sorties a day."¹⁶ Air Guard tankers supported air combat tactics, close air support, weapons delivery, low-altitude navigation, and night proficiency training as well as mobility exercises.¹⁷

Creek Party, along with earlier initiatives to improve the readiness of the ANG and the AFRES such as the gaining command concept of air reserve forces management, had a significant influence on Defense Department policies for the reserve components of all the military services as the war in Southeast Asia wound down. After Vietnam, all reserve forces planning and policy making within the American armed services was supposed to be governed by the total force

policy. Based largely on the Air Force's experience with the Air Guard and Air Force Reserve, it was adopted by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird in August 1970. The total force sought to strengthen and rebuild public confidence in the reserves while saving money by reducing the size of the active duty force. Those objectives emerged from America's disenchantment with the conflict in Southeast Asia.

In practical terms, the total force sought to insure that all policy making, planning, programming, and budgeting activities within the Defense Department considered active and reserve forces concurrently. Its ambitious objective was to determine the most efficient mix of those forces in terms of costs versus their contributions to national security. It also committed the nation to use Guardsmen and Reservists instead of draftees as the first and primary source of manpower to augment the active duty forces in any future conflict. Much of the credit for the total force concept belonged to Dr Theodore Marrs, an avid former Air Guardsmen and Air Force Reservist from Alabama, who served as a high ranking civilian official in the Air Force and the Defense Department in the early 1970s.¹⁸

The underlying political motivation for the total force concept was the determination of key military and congressional leaders to prevent a repeat of a serious policy error during the Vietnam War. Along with lengthening casualty lists and the prospect of an endless conflict in Southeast Asia, the failure of the Johnson administration to initiate a major mobilization of the National Guard and Reserves had helped to undermine public support for the war.¹⁹

Proponents of the policy recognized that, what some saw as the greatest

weakness of the National Guard and Reserves -- their political sensitivity -- was their strongest point.²⁰ They were convinced that the Guard and Reserves, not draftees, were the strongest political links between the American people and the active duty military establishment. The former were part of organized groups with strong established relationships with Capitol Hill as well as courthouses and statehouses across America. The latter were composed of individuals, many of them from the more vulnerable and politically powerless groups in American society, who lacked effective representation in the political system.

President Richard M. Nixon's administration also found the total force concept useful on Capitol Hill. Sensitive to the intensity of anti-military congressional feeling in the early 1970s, the administration stressed that a much larger share of the nation's scaled-back defense budgets was going to the reserve components. Although military spending dropped dramatically from 42.1 percent of the federal budget when Nixon was inaugurated President in 1969 to 23.7 percent in 1977 when Gerald Ford left the White House, the dollars devoted to the reserve components rose significantly. Expenditures on the Guard and Reserves nearly doubled between 1968 and 1974.

Acknowledging that substantial progress had been made in implementing the total force concept, Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger upgraded its official status in August 1973. He wrote that the "Total Force is no longer a concept. It is now a Total Force Policy which integrates the active, Guard, and reserve forces into a homogenous whole."²¹

Creek Party was part of a growing trend within the Air Force of

integrating the operations and training of the reserve components with those of the active force. The Air Guard had been employing a total force approach since the air defense runway alert program began on an experimental basis in 1953. Two aircraft and their pilots had stood alert from sunrise to sunset at Syracuse, New York and Hayward, California. That initiative had integrated the training of the Guard's fighter interceptors with the daily operational requirements of the Air Defense Command. By 1961, it had been expanded into a permanent, round-the-clock program that included 25 ANG fighter squadrons. By 1992, the ANG provided 100 percent of the Air Force's greatly-reduced air defense interceptor force.²² The runway alert program was the first broad effort to integrate reserve units into the regular peacetime operating structure of the American armed forces on a continuing basis. It had been the genesis of the total force approach to reserve components' training and operational support of the Air Force.²³

That integrating impulse which lay at the core of the Air Force's total force approach to reserve forces policy had been extended overseas during the Vietnam War era when Guard volunteers began flying airlift missions to Southeast Asia on a continuing basis in 1966. The flights were finally terminated in 1972 as active American military involvement in the Vietnam War drew to a close.²⁴

Meanwhile, the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), headquartered in Panama, had not enjoyed a high priority in the scramble for shrinking defense resources after the Vietnam War ended. Consequently, it had asked the Air Force Reserve and the Air National Guard to help meet its theater airlift requirements to support embassies, defense attaches, military assistance

advisory groups in Latin America. Seeing an opportunity to shore up their organizational futures while providing good training for their C-130 units, the air reserve components eagerly agreed to a volunteer rotation that was similar in many of its essential elements to Creek Party except that the responsibility for it was shared by both organizations. In October 1977, they inaugurated Operation Volant Oak from Howard Air Base in Panama. Beginning with the Air Force Reserve, each component alternated responsibility for providing C-130s plus volunteer crews and support personnel to USSOUTHCOM. Participating units organized 15-day rotations with 4 to 6 of their aircraft involved at any given time. Usually, about 110 Guardsmen or Reservists would deploy with each rotation.²⁵

In 1978, the Air Guard began a fighter rotation to Howard Air Base with its A-7s units known as Operation Coronet Cove. Volunteers and full-time Air Guard support personnel rotated every 15 days. Taking over from the Tactical Air Command, the Guard fighters primarily trained in close air support and interdiction roles with ground forces in Panama. Air Guard fighter and airlift units deployed to Panama in December 1989 participated in the U.S. military intervention there which removed Manuel Noriega from power in that nation. Coronet Cove was terminated in 1990 and replaced by Coronet Nighthawk which employed ANG F-16s to help monitor suspected drug traffickers flying through the region. ²⁶

During the Spring of 1977, the old number 841 " . . . lumbered away from the 126th Air Refueling Wing's parking ramp at O'Hare International Airport . . . She was dirty and oil spattered because like all KC-97s, she throws a lot of oil and, like all the 97s, her brakes squeak. . . . This was a nostalgic

flight, the last Creek Party mission for the 126th."²⁷ Across America, most of the Air Guard's tanker units were preparing to make " . . . their final runs to Rhein Main. Those [KC-97L units] slated for early conversion to the KC-135 will be flown to the boneyard not long after they return to home bases."²⁸

The final Creek Party sortie was flown on 28 April 1977. Several factors apparently War's end, additional Air Force personnel and tankers eventually became available for service in Europe. The Guard's aging fleet of KC-97Ls, increasingly expensive to operate and maintain, began to be replaced by early model KC-135s in 1975.

Creek Party was hailed as great success. USAFE stressed that the operation" . . . demonstrated the 'total force' long before that term was in vogue. During the ten years that Creek Party was in operation, the Guard made a vital contribution to the mission of USAFE. Starting with their first sortie . . . the KC-97s flew 5,948 accident-free missions, supported in excess of 44,500 tactical aircraft, and dispensed more than 133 million pounds of JP-4 fuel. Strategic Air Command's 306th Strategic Wing assumed the full air refueling responsibility following the departure of the Creek Party KC-97s."²⁹

An Air Guardsman studying the operation while a student at the Air War College concluded that "The experience gained by Guardsmen at all echelons in 'real world' operations [including Creek Party] is an invaluable asset in achieving a bonafide level of combat readiness, and establishes a rapport with gaining command organizations."³⁰ Lt. Col. Robert W, Eno, Jr., cautioned that several factors would influence whether or not volunteer operations like "Creek Party" would be successful. He stressed that "Length of individual tour,

location of assignment, local employment pressures, productivity of mission in terms of personal satisfaction, and general motivation of the organization are some of the more obvious factors which must be considered."³¹ The Guard's subsequent experience with "Creek Party" and other volunteer overseas rotations bore out the importance of each of those factors with the possible exception of local employment conditions which, as a general rule, had little apparent impact on them.

During Creek Party, Air Guardsmen flew 6,512 sorties, completing 47,207 air refueling hookups while off-loading 137,398,620 pounds of fuel. The operation demonstrated that the ANG could sustain a sizeable operational rotation overseas without compelling the President to resort to a politically sensitive mobilization.³² According to USAFE, "During the ten years Creek Party was in operation, the [Air] Guard made a vital contribution to the mission of USAFE."³³ The Pennsylvania Air National Guard's 171st Air Refueling Wing emphasized that Creek Party deployments " . . . allowed each tanker unit to actually practice its assigned wartime mission on each deployment, but on a smaller scale. The unit mobility plan was exercised, the aircrews remained proficient in overwater navigation on the North Atlantic routes, while support personnel riding in the aircraft maintained the aircraft enroute in severe winter conditions through Goose Bay, Labrador, and Keflavick, Iceland."³⁴

Brig. Gen. James C. Smith, commander of the 136th Air Refueling Wing, Texas ANG, was convinced that 10 years of Creek Party had done " . . . more to introduce the Air Guard capabilities to members of the Regular Air Force than any other activity in the history of the Guard. It has gained us recognition that is vital to continued existence as a cost-effective force."³⁵

Since the Cold War's end, it has become routine for force packages of air reserve components volunteers to deploy overseas for relatively short periods of time to participate in "real world" operations such as Guardsmen had done during Creek Party. These deployments have been designed to both relieve the high operations tempo of the increasingly smaller active force and provide realistic training opportunities for the air reserve components, especially in the airlift and tanker communities. In April 1999 for example, Hawaii Air Guard tankers on a previously scheduled rotation to Europe, refueled NATO fighters in the initial strikes against Serbian military positions in Kosovo. At that time, approximately 55 percent of the Air Force's total tankers belonged to its reserve components. During the first month of Operation Allied Force, the service relied on volunteers from its reserve components to support its air refueling needs.³⁶

Creek Party established the original model for such volunteer overseas operations. Begun in a relatively modest way in 1967, such "real world" deployments have become a routine way of doing business for the Air Guard and Air Force Reserve as the twentieth century drew to a close. Creek Party was an important early milestone in the gradual conversion of the air reserve components from wartime reserve forces to organizations that have become integral elements of the Air Force in peace and war.

NOTES

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