

Difficult Ascent

Political clout, institutional will and necessity enabled the Air Guard to survive its humble origins 60 years ago this month

By Charles J. Gross

THE 2005 BASE Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process stimulated tensions between the active-component Air Force and the Air National Guard not seen since the post-World War II structure of the U.S. military was cobbled together and tested in the crucible of war.

In 2005, senior Air Force leaders used BRAC 2005 to simultaneously eliminate what it considered unneeded infrastructure and help reshape and modernize its force structure including that of the Air Guard.

When the Defense Department released the BRAC recommendations May 13, 2005, the result was the potential loss of one-third of Air Guard flying units.

Adjutants general complained bitterly that the list was put together without their input. Only Lt. Gen. Daniel James III, Air Guard director, and a small number of his staff from the National Guard Bureau had participated in the process within the Pentagon.

Sworn to secrecy at the time, James later observed that he could not convince senior Air Force leaders that they were going too far, too fast in their effort to trim manpower, legacy aircraft and infra-

structure from the Air Guard.

To many, the process made the Air Guard a “bill payer” for the new Air Force weapons systems. State leaders were especially unhappy.

“These are the wrong [BRAC] recommendations, at the wrong time and for the wrong reasons, and, on top of all that they are illegal,” said Illinois Gov. Rod R. Blagojevich.

The controversy was more reminiscent than surprising. It recalled emotions and included intense political maneuvering not unlike the fight associated with the Air Guard’s creation 60 years ago this month, when it became a separate reserve component of the brand new Air Force.

As in 2005 BRAC, senior Army Air Forces (AAF) leadership after World War II drew up initial postwar plans at the expense of the National Guard (and the other services).

The AAF eyed a large active force at the highest state of readiness to conduct immediate combat operations in the event of war. With strategic bombardment its centerpiece, the AAF ignored Guard aviation in its plans.

Senior AAF officers often viewed the Guard as militarily inept and pervaded by state and local politics. They preferred a federal reserve program such as the Navy’s that would focus on support missions.

During the war, Guard leaders were alarmed by bad press its mobilized divisions received from the active-component Army, personnel policies that stripped many talented Guardsmen from their units and the virtual disappearance of the Guard from the postwar planning process in the War Department.

While the National Defense Act of 1920 mandated that the War Department consider Guard and Reserve officer views when formulating reserve-component plans and policies, the office on Guard and Reserve policy had been suspended since May 1942.

In addition, NGB had been removed from the War Department’s special staff in April 1941 and placed in a bureaucratically powerless position within the Army Service Forces.

Rumors at the time suggested the War Department had secret plans to exclude the Guard from postwar federal military



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system. Guard officials also were alarmed by the public advocacy of an entirely federal military reserve system by Brig. Gen. John McAuley Palmer, a close friend and mentor of Gen. George C. Marshall, who had been brought out of retirement by the Army chief of staff to help formulate the War Department's postwar plans.

As a result, senior Guardsmen turned to NGAUS to preserve the Guard's federal war fighting role.

In April 1943, 65 Guard leaders met at Harrisburg, Pa., and selected Maj. Gen. Ellard A. Walsh, adjutant general of Minnesota, as NGAUS president.

After establishing a small permanent headquarters in Washington, D.C., he began lobbying Capitol Hill and the Pentagon to save the Guard's postwar combat role.

MILITARY AVIATION WAS playing a tremendous role during the war, with 29 Guard observation squadrons and their 4,800 personnel integrated into the AAF. Those circumstances convinced NGAUS to promote Guard combat units as a reserve component of the planned new military service.

Walsh and other Guard supporters wanted a guarantee that the Guard could participate in the postwar planning process, retain its state-federal status and be an Army reserve component.

Meanwhile, Palmer changed his views and convinced Marshall that they should retain the Guard as the Army's primary combat reserve force.

A bitter public fight with the Guard, he reasoned, could delay or derail other postwar Army priorities, primarily universal military training (UMT).

Marshall accepted Palmer's arguments because he wanted Congress to enact legislation setting up a UMT system before wartime American enthusiasm for military service subsided. But Walsh publicly attacked the Army's treatment of the Guard and threatened to lobby against UMT in Congress unless the National Guard was included.

The NGAUS political pressure worked. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson created a committee of active-component and Guard officers that met in August and September 1944 to examine postwar policy impacts on the Guard and make recommendations to the War Department.

NGB was removed from the Army Service Forces in May 1945 and returned to the War Department. On Dec. 12, 1945, NGB established a three-person staff to plan and organize the Air Guard after Congress' expected endorsement of the new reserve organization.

Meanwhile, the War Department tied the Guard's future to a debate over the size and composition of postwar ground and air forces.

AAF planners initially advocated a million-man postwar independent Air Force, organized around 105 combat air groups. In August 1944, War Department planners reached a compromise, which called for an AAF (later Air Force) of 430,000 full-time professionals and 74 combat groups.

They would be part of a total Army of 1,093,050 professionals and 630,217 individuals that would be brought into the service each year under a UMT proposal advocated by ground forces leaders. The plan, however, didn't involve the Air Guard.

EARLY TRAINING F-84 Thunderjets from the Kansas Air Guard's 127th Fighter Squadron roar across the sky during annual training in June 1950.



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Key Voice Maj. Gen. Ellard A. Walsh, NGAUS president, was critical to preserving the Guard's combat role after World War II and in forming the Air Guard.

But in November 1944, Marshall had planners prepare for a smaller ground Army consisting of 100,000 regulars and 320,000 UMT trainees.

The AAF would be limited to 120,000 regulars and 200,000 trainees, with operational air strength of 16 groups. Gen. Henry H. Arnold, the AAF's commander, violently opposed this plan.

Changing circumstances, however, including NGAUS and Marshall's guidance, forced the AAF to reconsider the Guard's postwar role.

An Air Staff study released in October 1945 assumed state-controlled military forces with a federal role would survive the war. Those forces would include an Air Guard for the projected postwar Air Force,

but it would participate only in secondary missions.

The study said 90 percent of Air Guard personnel should be anti-aircraft artillery (AAA) troops with the remainder assigned to flying or possibly aircraft control and warning (AC&W) units.

The Guard, including its air component, had ensured its postwar survival as a federal combat reserve force. In June 1945, Maj. Gen. William F. Tompkins, head of the War Department's special planning division, told the House Select Committee on Postwar Military Policy that the department viewed the Army as the first line of reserves and the Guard secondary one.

In return for this major policy shift,

NGAUS reversed itself and supported UMT in public testimony before the same committee.

That same summer, officials drew up proposals for the postwar reserve system. Approved by the secretary of war in October 1945, the plan clearly committed the department to a dual-component reserve system, including an Air Guard.

THE AIR GUARD would be the main source of organized combat ready units for the new postwar Air Force.

Initial Air Guard plans called for 12 wing headquarters commanding 24 fighter groups, 12 AC&W units, 14 AAA brigades, and three light-bomber groups.

They would be Mobilization-Day units capable of rapid expansion to wartime manning and full operational readiness.

Some Air Staff officers doubted the Air Guard could fulfill its Mobilization-Day role, especially its ability to operate and maintain increasingly complex modern weapons, but planning continued.

On Feb. 9, 1946, NGB announced the Air Guard plan to the states and territories.

After some further adjustments, the plan reflected a more significant federal wartime role for the Air Guard than earlier plans. It called for 514 flying and support units featuring 72 fighter and 12 light bomber squadrons. It also included 36 AC&W units.

Air Guard end strength was set at approximately 58,000 personnel with a June 30, 1947, target date for completing the organization. It would include 2,664 aircraft, 3,000 pilots, 4,900 nonrated officers and about 50,000 enlisted men.

The first postwar Air Guard unit was Colorado's 120th Fighter Squadron. However, progress in building the Air Guard as a combat ready reserve force was painfully slow during the late 1940s, with some Air Guardsmen privately considering their units as little more than glorified state-sponsored flying clubs.

When the National Security Act of 1947 made the Air Force a separate service, the Air Guard immediately became a reserve component.

But, faced with inadequate budgets, severe interservice rivalries, a critical shortage of combat-ready units, and strong

doubts about the military effectiveness of Guard units, the Air Force would not allocate sufficient resources to build strong reserve programs.

As a result, the Air Guard couldn't recruit adequate numbers of veteran combat fliers and enlisted members for its units. It also lacked a program to train new pilots and found it especially difficult to entice qualified senior officers to command some of its units based in rural locations. Moreover, Air Force officers saw no compelling justification for state-controlled military units whose missions they perceived as being federal.

Air Force operational readiness inspections concluded it would take an Air Guard fighter squadron more than 86 days to become fully operational in its air defense mission—unacceptable in 1949 after the Soviet Union detonated its first atomic bomb.

In November 1949, Lt. Gen. Ennis C. Whitehead, head of the Continental Air Command (CONAC) and responsible for inspecting and supervising the training of those units wrote that "at best, the Air National Guard represents flyable storage."

By January 1950, Air Force officials decided the Air Guard could not be relied upon as a ready force and instead should be an Army tactical support mission.

The next month, Gen. Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Air Force chief of staff, approved a proposal to eliminate the Air Guard's Mobilization-Day mission and give it less crucial responsibilities. Defense Secretary Louis A. Johnson rejected the proposal primarily for budgetary reasons.

ALTHOUGH AIR FORCE senior leaders reluctantly accepted the Air Guard as a political and budgetary reality, such tensions were commonplace among the two in the early years.

They struggled over who would control the Air Guard's missions, training, equipment, basing and budgets during peacetime while it remained in its state status.

Matters actually came to a head in 1948 when Defense Secretary James V. Forrestal proposed each service have a single reserve component. President Harry S. Truman stayed out of the political fracas, however, and allowed the Pentagon to fight

for congressional approval of the initiative.

Facing strong lobbying by NGAUS, Congress rejected the federalization proposal in February 1949.

After the effort to merge the Guard and Reserve died in 1949, Air Force officials focused on gaining control from NGB.

The Air Force saw the bureau as merely a conduit between itself and the states, which was to "communicate the service's directives concerning the administration, supply, and materiel for Air Guard units in preparation for their federal mission."

But NGB wanted a larger role and to participate in planning, policies and budgets that affected the Air Guard and its Army counterpart.

This friction over NGB's role dated to 1946, when the AAF tried to assert command and control of Guard air units in state service and pressure NGB into surrendering their budgets.

Maj. Gen. Kenneth F. Cramer, an Army Guardsman, exacerbated the situation when he tried to administer Air Guard units according to his own standards as head of the NGB.

NGB directed Air Guard units to ignore



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Air Force manuals and regulations it had not approved. Consequently, Air Guard unit tensions between the service and NGB burst into the headlines in October 1949 when Cramer unilaterally relieved Maj. Gen. George G. Finch, head of the bureau's Air Force division.

Finch, who believed that the Air Guard should follow Air Force policies, not Cramer's own views, was quickly

reinstated by Army Secretary Gordon Gray at the request of Air Force Secretary Stuart Symington, secretary of the Air Force.

Enraging Air Force leaders, the controversy led to a joint investigation by Army and Air Force inspectors general as well as a separate inquiry by Gen. Butler B. Miltonberger, a former NGB chief.

When the Korean War erupted in June 1950, Cramer and Finch were reassigned. Meanwhile, officials revamped NGB organization and operating procedures, strengthening the ability of Army and Air Guard leaders to administer programs in consonance with the directives of their parent services.

THE KOREAN WAR was a turning point in Air Guard and Air Force relations when the war call-up exposed weaknesses across the reserve system.

Some 45,000 Air Guardsmen, 80 percent of the force, were mobilized, including 66 of the Guard's 92 flying squadrons.

But Guard equipment—aircraft especially—was obsolete and its training was deplorable.

It took up to six months for some units to reach combat readiness. Some never did. Assignments were random to major air commands, regardless of previous training and equipment.

The Korean War mobilization fiasco forced the Air Force to reach an accommodation with the Air Guard and thoroughly revamp its entire reserve system. During the conflict, the Air Guard pioneered new approaches to reserve training and management within the Air Force.

Blessed with leaders such as Maj. Gens. Earl T. Ricks and Winston P. "Wimpy" Wilson and a strong political base, the Guard traded some state-federal autonomy for closer integration.

For its part, a rising generation of senior Air Force officers like Gen. Nathan F. Twining, who began his military career in the Oregon Guard in 1916, were more pragmatic, flexible, and innovative when dealing with the Air Guard.

Twining, who served in senior Air Force positions in the Pentagon from October 1950 through June 1957, includ-

ing the last four years as chief of staff, became a strong proponent of effective reserve programs including the Air Guard.

Ricks and Wilson recognized that the Air Guard faced a dim future unless it became a thoroughly professional force.

For them, the Air Guard required definite wartime missions. It also had to be integrated into Air Force planning, budgeting, exercises and operational missions.

They persuaded DoD to authorize 36 additional flight-training periods each year for aircrews beyond monthly drills and 15-day annual training requirements.

But since the Air Force could not accommodate growing training needs, the Air Guard established permanent field-training sites.

Using an innovation pioneered in Arkansas and Texas before the Korean War, the four mandatory Air Guard unit-training drills were concentrated on one weekend each month instead of one per week.

The Air Guard also added more full-time technicians and worked to acquire modern aircraft and facilities.

To accommodate high-performance jet aircraft, the Air Guard launched a major program to lengthen runways and construct other facilities at municipal airports.

The Air Guard also formed special operations squadrons at other locations in 1955. Later in the decade, it traded in vintage fighters for transports configured for aeromedical airlift missions. Above all, they were determined to ensure the Air Guard met the same tough professional training standards as the active component. They sold those concepts to the Guard, the Air Force, Congress and the states.

To increase readiness in March 1953, units at Syracuse, N.Y., and Hayward, Calif., began standing alert from an hour before sunrise to an hour after sunset, the first of the runway-alert program. Despite Air Staff doubts and initial resistance, the experiment was a success.

By 1961, it had expanded into a permanent, round-the-clock program that included 25 Air Guard fighter squadrons. It was the genesis of the Total Force approach to reserve-components' training

and operational support of the active-duty military establishment pioneered by the Air Force.

These experiences reversed the downward slide of the Guard's relationship with the Air Force and marked the beginning of the Air Guard's evolution into an increasingly effective reserve component, laying the foundation that supports the Air Guard to this day.

As a result, even during the 2005 BRAC battle, when the Air Guard and Air Force found themselves in a strained relationship, they worked through it. Unlike the early years of the Cold War, changes associated with BRAC 2005 and other initiatives have placed the Air Guard at the forefront of Air Force transformational efforts, designed to insure that it operates some of the service's most advanced weapons systems, which will allow the Air Guard to maintain a crucial role in emerging missions. 

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SCRAMBLE Ohio Air Guard pilots run to their F-84 Thunderjets during an early runway-alert mission. The controversial program was a genesis of the Total Force approach to reserve-component support of of the active component.