

# “The Guard Gets The Nod”

by  
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By 1954, Headquarters United States Air Force planning to phase-out the three remaining active duty Air Resupply Groups (ARGs) by 1956 brought it face-to-face with the same thorny question that it had attempted to answer with their activation in 1950: Who would provide air support for military and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) unconventional warfare forces in the event of war? While Air Force enthusiasm for special operations had clearly waned, the potential for the cold war to suddenly turn hot clearly had *not*. At a minimum, a low-cost cadre of aircrews and aircraft had to be maintained somewhere by someone. But where, and by whom?

A year later, the answer to these questions became evident following a complex series of inter-departmental meetings in Washington D.C. and several state capitols. In the end the Air National Guard in California, West Virginia, Maryland, and Rhode Island agreed to form Air Resupply Groups (ARGs) to train for the Air Force’s wartime unconventional warfare mission. Despite this state-federal agreement however, the sensitive nature of the new Air Guard mission was deliberately downplayed within the states themselves for quite some time.

In the absence of an active-duty force ,the decision to go to the “Air Guard” had one great advantage in its favor. Unlike the never-ending personnel rotations that characterize the active forces, Air Guard personnel frequently spend their entire careers flying and maintaining aircraft at the same unit.. The overwhelming advantage of such continuity has been frequently demonstrated in tactical competitions in which Air Guardsmen outperform their active duty contemporaries. This experience proved doubly fortunate as no concerted effort seems to have been made to channel ARG personnel leaving active duty into these new Air Guard units.

In California the 129th Air Resupply Group (ARG) formed up in April, 1955; West Virginia activated the 130th ARG that October, with Maryland beating them by two months with the 135th ARG; Rhode Island did the same in November of the same year with the 143 ARG. Concurrent with establishing four Air Resupply Groups came the obvious issue of what aircraft would be selected for the ARGs.

Initially all four Air Guard units were equipped with both the C-46 Commando and the SA-16 Albatross. While the C-46s were phased out within the first years, the versatile Albatross amphibian continued on to become the standard workhorse for the Air Force’s unconventional air warfare missions. The standardization of one type of aircraft within the ARGs further simplified operational and maintenance programs, which

in turn expedited the pace at which the Guardsmen could hone the necessary skills for their new mission.

The mission of course was identical to that of the active-duty units which the Guardsmen were replacing: unconventional and psychological warfare. With the organization established and the aircraft coming in, the most pressing question quickly turned to the subject of training. Single-ship, low-level flying in and out of remote airstrips both day and night, not to mention of course water operations, were a long stretch for a group of Guard fighter pilots used to high-altitude, day formation flying.

In the ensuing years the Guardsmen would learn that while their mission would remain essentially unchanged, little else would remain static in their organizations. The C-46s were largely phased out by 1958, the same year in which all four states underwent name changes that converted the Air Resupply units to Troop Carrier Groups.<sup>1</sup> In 1963 all four states were-designated Air Commando Groups, following the revival of the active duty Air Commando force at Hurlburt Field, Florida. Five years later in still another name change both active and Guard units became Special Operations squadrons, groups, and wings.

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<sup>1</sup> Initially designated the 143rd Troop Carrier Squadron (Medium), the 143rd grew to Group status by 1962. The following year it was re-designated yet again as the 143rd Air Commando Squadron/Group.

If organizational titles were fluid, the arrival of additional types of aircraft also added versatility to the Air Guard's special operations capabilities. All units began picking up the new U-10 "Helio-courier", a single-engine, Short-Takeoff/Landing (STOL) liaison-type aircraft ideally suited for remote area operations. To replace the C-46s both the California and West Virginia units received the big C-119 "Flying Boxcars". In the absence of active duty special operations forces in the late 1950s, all Air Force expertise in unconventional warfare clearly belonged to the Guard.

In June 1971, Maryland's 135th Special Operations Group (SOG) was re-designated a Tactical Air Support Group, with the Tactical Air Command becoming the gaining command. Its HU-16s and U-10s were phased out to be replaced by the O-2A "Skymaster". Four years later California's 129th SOG became the 129th Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Group, part of the Military Airlift Command. During that same year both Rhode Island and West Virginia SOGs were equipped with the C-130 transport and re-designated Tactical Airlift Groups. The special operations era for the Air National Guard passed into history . . . or did it?

If the enthusiasm for special operations forces seems to fluctuate within the military community, the enduring reality is that the need for these skills in a seemingly still dangerous world never diminished entirely. West Virginia's C-130s are seen years later at Hurlburt Field, Florida, home of the Air Force Special Operations Command

(AFSOC). And the Pennsylvania Air Guard's 193rd Special Operations Wing still makes a very unique, low-profile contribution to AFSOC with its specially-equipped aircraft. Clearly the sensitive files for Air Guard special operations duties must still be marked "Ongoing".

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