

Lt. Col. Steve
Beauchamp prepares
for a morning sortie.



A NOBLE CAUSE

AIRMEN TAKE PART IN MISSION
TO PROTECT THE NATION'S SKY

STORY BY TECH. SGT. MATTHEW BATES ✪ PHOTOS BY STAFF SGT. JOHN HUGHEL

The radios were silent. This was one of the first things Lt. Col. Steve Beauchamp noticed as his F-15 Eagle lifted off the runway and started tearing through the sky. A pilot with the 142nd Fighter Wing, an Air National Guard unit based out of Portland, Ore., he'd flown in the area for quite some time. Normally, the colonel's headset would be filled with chatter from air traffic controllers and other aircraft in the local airspace.

This time, though, there was nothing. No chatter, no squawks, no beeps.

It wasn't just the silence that was

weird. It was also the feeling of isolation. Other than his wingman's F-15 flying next to the colonel, there wasn't a single other aircraft visible in the air — no commercial airliners, no police or traffic helicopters, no private prop jobs. Nothing.

"It was so surreal," Beauchamp said. "It's like we were the only people in the world up there."

Normally, this would be a fighter pilot's dream. He could go where he wanted, when he wanted. But this flight was no joy ride. This flight had a mission: find any unauthorized aircraft and shoot them down.

These words were still hanging over the colonel's head as he tried to make

sense of them. It had only been a few hours since he was staring at the television and watching the images of two of the World Trade Center towers burning. Words like "under attack," and "terrorism," kept being repeated and then he was in his flight suit, sitting in the cockpit and waiting for the word to go.

At first, the information trickling in was sketchy, but the known details were horrifying. Terrorists had taken over several planes and were using them as deadly, piloted missiles.

So, now, here he was, in the sky above Portland on a course to intercept a civilian airliner that was flying near Vancouver, Canada.



(from left)
Operation Noble
Eagle supporters
Tech. Sgt. Andrew
Shown, Beauchamp
and Master Sgt.
Mark Billmyer after a
flight at the Portland
Air National Guard
Base, Portland, Ore.



Beauchamp prepares for a mission with a preflight inspection.

“When we were being briefed and getting ready for the mission, I kept talking to the other guys and the whole mood was pretty somber,” Beauchamp said. “It was like, ‘Man, we might have to shoot down an airplane full of innocent people.’”

This thought was now clinging to the colonel’s spine like an icicle as the airliner came into view on the horizon.

“Our orders were to get close and look for signs of duress among the passengers,” he said.

So, the two fighters came in on either side of the airliner and the pilots scanned the windows, trying to see inside the large plane.

Then, suddenly, bursts of bright light started coming from inside the airliner.

Laughing, the colonel radioed his wingman.

“It’s flashes!” he said into the radio. “They’re taking pictures.”

The plane, coming from Japan, was full of tourists headed to America and they were excited to take photos of the Air Force fighters.

Relieved and not seeing any other signs for alarm, the colonel and his wingman escorted the plane to the nearest runway.

The ordeal was over. But this mission’s ending was just the beginning of another.

**WE’RE ALL HERE FOR
ONE THING, AND THAT’S
TO PROTECT THE
AMERICAN PEOPLE AND
THE AMERICAN WAY OF
LIFE. WE’RE ALL
COMMITTED TO THAT.**

— Lt. Col. Steve Beauchamp

Operation Noble Eagle was born.

Since that day 10 years ago, Air Force fighters have flown approximately 42,000 sorties as part of Operation Noble Eagle and have responded to more than 3,400 possible air threats. The operation uses

a wide range of Air Force assets, including the F-15 Eagle, the F-22 Raptor, the F-16 Fighting Falcon and support aircraft such as Airborne Warning and Control System and air-to-air refueling planes.

ONE is part of the overall plan to protect North America from airborne attack. Falling under the North American Aerospace Defense Command, the operation is directly controlled by 1st Air Force, headquartered at Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla. The combined air operations center at Tyndall acts as a “brain” for the entire continental United States airspace and three subordinate air sectors handle various regions of the country. These are the Southeast Air Defense Sector at Tyndall, the Northeast Air Defense Sector at Rome, N.Y., and the Western Air Defense Sector at McChord AFB, Wash.

All of these sectors are responsible for monitoring and reacting to any threats in their airspace.

Over the past 10 years, Airmen



from the United States and Canada have stood on call 24 hours per day, 365 days per year, to ensure these areas over North America are safe.

In recent years, the nation's civilian and military leaders started to regard the expansive air defense operation above the nation's cities as a permanent defense requirement demanding significant attention from the U.S. Air Force. Despite substantial improvements in aviation security, the Air Force has been charged with keeping this program of combat air patrols going full-bore indefinitely.

At any given time, according to NORAD officials, Noble Eagle aircraft may be flying air patrol missions over more than 15 U.S. cities. Also, special security events like the Super Bowl and presidential visits usually warrant air protection.

This protection doesn't come cheap. Since 2001, the operation has cost an estimated \$27 billion, according to officials at 1st Air Force. Last year alone, ONE cost over \$50

million, according to the fiscal year 2012 President's Budget, released by the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

As the Air Force and sister services transform to meet the global challenges to the nation and the dynamic nature of future operations continues to evolve, 1st Air Force is developing and employing new capabilities to ensure the Airmen supporting the mission are ready to respond to any Homeland Defense operations. The threat and the environment, in a global context, have shifted dramatically over the past decade. Air Force leaders believe that the rate and kinds of changes will continue, if not accelerate, in the next decade.

For the men and women who perform ONE operations daily, the mission is about the intangibles: the lives saved, the buildings still standing and the tragedies averted.

Ultimately, though, it's about necessity.

"Homeland defense is a zero failure mission," Beauchamp said.

"There's no room for error and that means everyone has to be on top of their game."

This means evaluating threats and reacting to alerts as fast as possible. To respond to these alerts, the detachments always have two fighters "at the ready," meaning they can launch at a moment's notice. These planes range from F-15 Eagles to F-16 Fighting Falcons to even the Air Force's newest fighter, the F-22 Raptor. The planes are fueled, prepped and loaded with ammunition and missiles at all times and two pilots and a maintenance crew are on call 24 hours per day.

"Typically, we can be in the air in just a couple minutes," Beauchamp said.

At each alert station, pilots take turns pulling alert duty in teams of two. They and the on-call maintenance crews live in a small building near the flight line, complete with a kitchen, living area and sleeping quarters. Attached hangars house the alert aircraft.

Shown marshals
an F-15 aircraft from
a ready barn at the
Portland ANGB.

Beauchamp and
Master Sgt. Mark
Billmyer greet each
other before a
morning flight on the
142nd Fighter Wing
flightline.





“It’s sort of like an ‘aerial’ fire station,” Beauchamp said. “Except instead of responding to fires, we’re responding to threats in the sky.”

The threats vary from mission to mission.

“It’s so interesting day to day because you don’t know what you’re going to face,” Beauchamp said. “One day you can respond to an aircraft that’s off course and the next you could be responding to someone flying too close to Air Force One.”

When one of these situations occurs, the alarm goes off and the fighters scramble.

One way the detachment gets an alert is through a system of lights that tell pilots and ground crews how to respond. If it’s a green light, then the fighters take off as soon as they can. If the light is green and yellow, then the fighters hold on the runway. If the light is yellow only, then crews prep the fighters, but they hold in the hangars. A red light kills a mission.

A horn also sounds when there’s an alert — a loud, piercing sound that is unmistakable.

Waiting for the alarm to sound is what the job is all about, which, at times, can make for an anxious work atmosphere. A mix of teamwork and camaraderie keeps the alert teams sharp and ensures when the alarm does go off they are ready.

“We work together and we get the job done,” Beauchamp said. “We’re all here for one thing, and that’s to protect the American people and the American way of life. We’re all committed to that.”

This is due in large part to a very capable team of maintenance experts that can fix just about anything in-house. From tire repair and engine maintenance to ordnance loading and electronics calibration, these maintenance teams can do it all.

The rapid advancement of new information and knowledge systems in the past 10 years has made it possible for 1st Air Force to conduct operations in new ways and more effectively.

“When we get a call, these jets need to be in the air,” said Master Sgt. Sam Dunn, an F-15 crew chief

with the 142nd FW. “This means when the pilots get in that jet, it has to work. Not just some of the time, but all of the time.”

The alert teams aren’t just a good mix of enlisted and officers. The teams are also a solid mix of total force components. Active, Guard and Reserve Airmen all contribute to ONE, with the Air National Guard currently providing the bulk of assigned personnel.

It’s not a competition, though, and the units understand this. For them, the only thing that matters is getting the mission done — together.

“We’re all in to make sure a tragedy like 9/11 doesn’t happen again,” Beauchamp said. “That’s why we’re out there day after day, patrolling the skies and keeping this country safe.”

While keeping America safe is motivation enough, the colonel is further motivated by the memory of the day the radios went silent and the sky was empty.

“That can’t happen again,” he said. “And on our watch, it won’t.” 🦅

An F-15A Eagle from the 142nd Fighter Wing takes off from the Portland ANGB.

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