

## THIRD AIR FORCE

Third Air Force's lineage began on 19 October 1940 with the establishment of the Southeast Air District, one of four regional headquarters responsible for US air defense. Two months later, it activated on 18 December 1940 and established its headquarters at MacDill Field, Florida. It was redesignated 3 Air Force on 26 March 1941 and later Third Air Force on 18 September 1942. After Pearl Harbor, Third's mission expanded to include training Army Air Forces combat crews, military police, medical, and chemical units for duty overseas. By war's end, it had graduated over a quarter-million soldiers and airmen. Among the units Third Air Force trained was Headquarters Eighth Air Force, which had originally been attached to Third for administration and supply. Ironically, Eighth would become USAFE and is now the parent command of Third Air Force. After the war, Third was assigned briefly to Tactical Air Command, before inactivating on 1 November 1946.

The second phase of Third Air Force history began 1 May 1951, when the headquarters was organized and activated at RAF South Ruislip. Its mission was to manage the burgeoning US Air Force presence in the United Kingdom (UK). Britain became the key USAF overseas base area following the outbreak of the Korean War, and the US presence there grew dramatically in the early 1950s. British bases remained central in the war plans of Strategic Air Command (SAC) into the mid-1960s, and SAC medium bombers (B-29s, B-50s, and later B-47s) were a constant presence in the UK until March 1965. SAC's Seventh Air Division, also located at South Ruislip, commanded these bombers. Third's role was to provide logistics support to Seventh, exercise operational control of its own tactical units, and serve as focal point for dealings with the British government on all USAF matters in the UK.

One recurring theme in Third Air Force's history has been the ebb and flow of responsibilities between it and other headquarters, usually driven by budget and personnel ceilings. On 1 July 1961, USAFE consolidated operational control of all its tactical units under Seventeenth Air Force in Germany. This allowed manpower cuts of over 300 spaces at USAFE headquarters and Third Air Force. Third was left with logistical support of units in the UK and dealings with the British government. Consolidation did not work, in part because Seventeenth could not manage the USAFE tactical force of 11 wings plus the five Air National Guard wings sent to Europe in November 1961 during a new crisis over Berlin. USAFE restored operational control of the units in the UK to Third Air Force on 1 September 1963. In April 1972, the pendulum swung again, as the command stripped Third Air Force of operational control of its tactical wings and reduced its headquarters manning from 234 to 63. The smaller headquarters moved to RAF Mildenhall on 15 April 1972. The pendulum swung back in the 1980s, when a new USAFE commander sought to expand the role of the numbered air force headquarters. Operational control of the tactical wings returned to Third in June 1987. A year later the headquarters had grown to 149 people.

That larger headquarters handled some important issues in the 1980s. Third Air Force's biggest program that decade was undoubtedly the deployment of ground-launched cruise missiles (GLCMs). This project was an eight-year effort to counter Soviet deployment of SS-20s in Eastern Europe. These two-stage, multiple-warhead, mobile Soviet missiles had a range of 3,000 miles. Moscow began deploying them in 1977 and continued to do so, at a rate of about one a week, for the

next five years. In response, NATO decided to deploy 108 Pershing IIs and 464 GLCMs while seeking an agreement with Moscow that would limit theater nuclear weapons.

The first GLCM arrived in Britain in November 1983, and USAFE had activated all six planned GLCM bases, two of them in Britain (RAF Greenham Common and RAF Molesworth) by September 1987. But by then Washington and Moscow were close to an agreement eliminating intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF) worldwide. Presidents Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev signed the INF treaty on 8 December 1987, and it entered into force in June 1988. USAFE inactivated its GLCM unit at RAF Molesworth in January 1989, and the one at Greenham Common followed in May 1991.

Third Air Force units also made history on the night of 14-15 April 1986, when they took part in Operation Eldorado Canyon. President Reagan ordered air strikes against Libya in retaliation for a Libyan-sponsored terrorist bombing in West Berlin that killed three and wounded 229. Eighteen F-111Fs from the 48th Tactical Fighter Wing, RAF Lakenheath, hit targets at Tripoli military airfield, Azziziyah barracks, and the Sidi Bilal training center with GBU-10 laser-guided bombs and 500-pound Mk-82 high-drag bombs. Three EF-111s from the 42d Electronic Combat Squadron, RAF Upper Heyford, jammed Libyan air defenses, while 28 tankers flew aerial refueling missions from RAF Mildenhall and RAF Fairford. Attack planes from the USS *America* and USS *Coral Sea* hit Benina airfield and barracks in Benghazi, while other Navy jets jammed and suppressed defenses. One F-111F went down during the raid and its two crew members were lost.

Third Air Force units were in the forefront of the world's response to the August 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. Eighteen F-111Fs from RAF Lakenheath were the first USAFE aircraft sent to the Persian Gulf in Operation Desert Shield, arriving at Taif, Saudi Arabia, on 25 August. Forty-six more had joined them by early December. Four EF-111As and 18 A-10s also left Britain for Saudi Arabia late in December. On the eve of the Gulf War, four F-111Fs and six EF-111As from Third Air Force flew to Incirlik Air Base, Turkey, to support Joint Task Force Proven Force, which opened a second front against Iraq from the north. In addition to deploying half its combat aircraft, Third Air Force sent several thousand vehicles and about 50,000 tons of munitions and other supplies to the combat zone. It activated three contingency hospitals with 2,250 beds to treat casualties. It provided critically important en-route support to units deploying to the Gulf, and provided forward bases for SAC B-52s and KC-135s. During the war, the F-111Fs from Lakenheath destroyed dozens of hardened aircraft shelters and hundreds of tanks with precision strikes. In a highly publicized attack, two of the wing's planes destroyed key portions of the Al Ahmadi oil station. The Iraqis had opened the oil station's spigots, polluting the Gulf with millions of gallons of oil. The attack destroyed the pump system and stopped the flow of oil.

With the Cold War and the Gulf War behind them, the men and women of Third Air Force faced new challenges in the 1990s. One was the reduction of US military presence in the United Kingdom. Famous names from the past, like Bentwaters, Greenham Common, and Upper Heyford returned to British control, and many American bases that stayed open faced cutbacks. On 30 September 1996, Seventeenth Air Force inactivated and Third assumed control of all USAFE units north of the Alps. It grew substantially, consisting of more than 25,000 military people and more

than 35,000 family members. Its aircraft fleet exceeded 200 planes, including KC-135s and F-15s in England, and A-10s, F-16s, C-9s, C-20s, C-21s and C-130Es in Germany.

In addition to a larger area of responsibility, the command reorganization also changed the mission of Third Air Force headquarters, which took a more active role in responding to contingencies and leading or augmenting joint and combined task force headquarters. In recent years, Third Air Force has deployed people and equipment to Turkey, Southwest Asia, Africa, and the Balkans. Most recently Third Air Force took part in Operation Guardian Assistance, the US military's response to the 1996 Zaire/Rwanda refugee crisis; Operation Assured Lift, the movement of African peacekeeping troops to Liberia in 1997; and Operation Eagle Vista, President Clinton's 1998 visit to Africa. Third Air Force pilots achieved four of six coalition aerial victories during Operation Allied Force, the NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia, while the headquarters provided the command element for Operation Shining Hope, US humanitarian assistance to Kosovar refugees.

As part of an Air Force reorganization program to activate warfighting headquarters and reduce the number of existing numbered air forces, USAFE chose to keep Sixteenth Air Force as its new warfighting headquarters. Subsequently, Sixteenth Air Force moved from Aviano Air Base, Italy, to Ramstein Air Base, Germany while Third Air Force inactivated on 1 November 2005, thus ending a long and prestigious 60 year legacy for one of the Air Force's finest combat organizations. But inactivation would not last for long.

During early 2006, Headquarters USAFE made the decision to once again activate Third Air Force because of its long history (Sixteenth Air Force lineage only began in the 1950s). On 1 December 2006, USAFE activated Third Air Force, with Third receiving orders to move to Ramstein Air Base, Germany and a new mission as the warfighting headquarters along with units formerly assigned to Sixteenth Air Force. These units included the 603d Support Group, 4th Air Support Operations Group (Heidelberg), 7th Weather Squadron (Heidelberg), and the 603d Air Operations Center. Third Air Force's mission also reflected its expanded role as a Component Numbered Air Force (C-NAF) for the U.S. European Command, involved in the "...planning, command, and control of the execution of simultaneous or sequential full spectrum air, space, and information operations in support of U.S. objectives." Third Air Force maintains continuous theater-wide situational awareness and provided COMUSAFE the capability to command and control assigned and attached forces. Third Air Force is prepared to provide C/JTF, C/JFACC and/or AFFOR core staffs to meet theater contingency requirements."

With many of its personnel experienced in humanitarian and contingency planning, Third Air Force continued to support various operations in Africa and Europe in late 2006 and 2007, all the while planning for a number of exercises that would certify the Third Air Force commander and staff in the Joint Task Force (JTF), Joint Forces Air Component Commander (JFACC), and Air Force Forces (AFFOR) roles in accordance with the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) training plan. In May 2007, a successful Flexible Leader 07 exercise validated Third Air Force's abilities to fulfill the JTF command role, the first U.S. Air Force NAF to become certified by a combat command. Another major exercise, Austere Challenge 08, likewise prompted EUCOM to certify Third Air Force in the JFACC and AFFOR roles.

Change is inevitable and on 20 April 2012, Third Air Force assumed responsibility as the numbered air component for U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) when Seventeenth Air Force inactivated. In addition, the Third Air Force staff in the UK aligned under USAFE, and redesignated from Third Air Force-UK to USAFE-UK while the 617th Air Operations Center (AOC) consolidated with the 603rd AOC, retaining the 603rd AOC designation, and supporting the EUCOM and AFRICOM areas of responsibility until realigned under USAFE on October 20, 2017. Finally, as a result of the USAFE-AFAFRICA Warfighter Headquarters Transition in 2018 with the C-NAF becoming a NAF, the Third Air Force Commander position went from a three-star Lieutenant General to a two-star Major General position and the JFACC roles and responsibilities transitioned to the USAFE-AFAFRICA Deputy Commander (DCOM) and the USAFE-AFAFRICA Commander. Today, Third Air Force plans, executes and assesses a full spectrum of airpower operations and consists of its headquarters operations directorate and 10 wings totaling more than 31,000 personnel.