

Twenty-Third Air Force

Over the last twelve months *TMF* has visited both Twenty-First and Twenty-Second Air Forces and their CONUS-based airlift wings. Now it's time to visit bases and personnel who are the backbone of Twenty-Third Air Force. We begin our tour with a visit to the headquarters at Hurlburt Field, located on the "Emerald Coast" of Florida; it's a tough job, but someone has to do it. I arrived under cover of darkness; how else can you report on special ops?

Twenty-Third Air Force serves a dual role as one of MAC's three numbered air forces, and as Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC), one of three service components of United States Special Operations Command. Having

By Maj. Steve Behr
Associate Editor

a twofold mission for the headquarters is just the beginning of what makes 23 AF distinct from other NAFs.

Just finding the headquarters entry could be a challenge to a first-time visitor. In keeping with the special forces tactic of diversion, 23 AF's entrance isn't at the front of their building, it's over to one side.

My first stop was with Lt. Col. Lloyd H. Hinze, Deputy Director of Safety; Lt. Col. Stuart B. "Stu" Foote, Chief of Flight Safety, my host for the visit, and Capt. Harold L. "Max" Maxwell, Flight Safety Officer. I know them all from my last assignment.

Colonel Foote related that the challenges for the flight safety staff are many. Having 17 weapon systems to keep up with and a two-person flight safety office is a good place to start. While the flight safety staff at 21st or 22d have flown the major weapon systems (C-5, C-130, or C-141) the staff at 23 AF depends on experts in the headquarters when dealing with detailed aircraft systems. Colonel Foote flies the C-21A with Det 4, 1402 MAS, Eglin AFB, Fla., he's also flown HH-53s, MH-53s, and T-38s. Captain Maxwell flies H-3s with 102 ARRS (ANG), Suffolk County Apt, N.Y., with previous experience in H-53s and H-60s. According to Colonel Foote, "Helicopters present the biggest challenge. We ask them to do a lot

MISSION

Twenty-Third Air Force (23 AF), with headquarters at Hurlburt Field, Fla., concurrently serves as one of MAC's three numbered air forces and one of three service elements of the unified U.S. Special Operations Command. Twenty-Third Air Force has no geographical limits and functions round-the-clock in all environments. The command's 139 elements are stationed at 52 separate locations, with a total of 14,800 folks. The 337 aircraft currently assigned include: H-1, H-3, H-43, and H-60 helicopters; and C-130, AC-130, HC-130, MC-130, WC-130, WC-135, C-9, C-140, CASA-212, C-12, C-21, and T-39 fixed wing aircraft.

The primary 23 AF mission is U.S. Air Force special operations. Other important missions are special operations training, combat rescue operations and training, aeromedical evacuation, operational support airlift, SAC missile site support, atmospheric sampling, weather reconnaissance, space shuttle contingency rescue support, facility flight checking, and peacetime search and rescue operations and coordination.

Seven wings are currently assigned to 23 AF: 1st Special Operations Wing, Hurlburt Field, Fla., 39th Special Operations Wing, Rhein-Main AB, Germany; 41st Rescue and Weather Reconnaissance Wing, McClellan

AFB, Calif., 353d Special Operations Wing, Clark AB, RPI; 376th Aeromedical Airlift Wing, Scott AFB, Ill., 1550th Combat Crew Training Wing, Kirtland AFB, N.M., and 1606th Air Base Wing, Kirtland AFB, N.M.

Other principal units are: Aerospace Rescue and Recovery Service (will become Air Rescue Service, reporting directly to Hq MAC, 1 August 1989), Scott AFB, Ill., USAF Medical Center, Scott AFB, Ill., USAF Special Operations School, Hurlburt Field, Fla., and 1720th Special Tactics Group, Hurlburt Field, Fla.

HISTORY

Special operations activities of the Army Air Forces during World War II were directed through the Office of Strategic Services in Europe and consisted mostly of infiltration and exfiltration of covert forces and supply and resupply of resistance groups. In the China-Burma-India Theater, the 1st Air Commando Group helped airdrop, airland, and resupply British troops behind Japanese lines in Burma.

During the Korean War, the Air Force activated several Air Resupply and Communications Wings to provide special operations capabilities in the Pacific Theater.

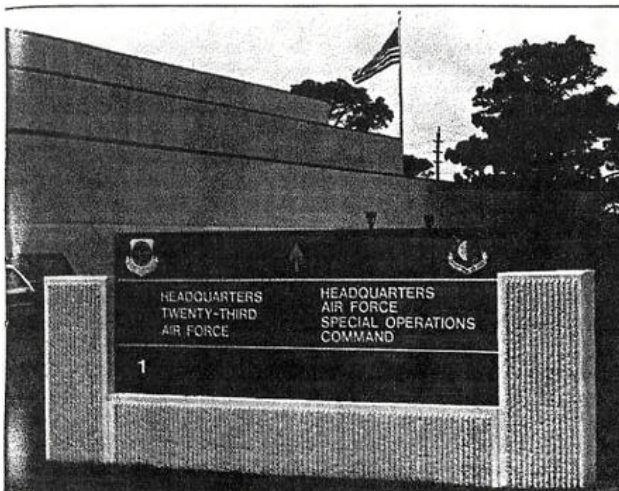
Another revival of special operations activities took place during the war in

Southeast Asia. In March 1961, during the Kennedy Administration, the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron of TAC was established at Eglin AFB, Fla., beginning a gradual buildup of Air Force special operations forces.

The Air Force Special Warfare Center was established at Eglin AFB in 1962. This organization was redesignated U.S. Air Force Special Forces in 1968 and deactivated 1 July 1974.

Twenty-Third Air Force was established at Scott AFB, Ill., 1 March 1983, combining Air Force special operations units and Air Force combat rescue units under one command. During the next two years, other units and missions were assigned. Following the establishment of U.S. Special Operations Command 16 April 1987, at MacDill AFB, Fla., 23 AF moved to Hurlburt Field 1 August 1987. In July 1987, Headquarters 23 AF also assumed the informal designation Headquarters Air Force Special Operations Command.

After undergoing reductions in forces during 1986 and 1987, 23 AF began activating new special operations units in 1988. In the future, 23 AF and AFSOC will continue to expand special operations activities.



Near the entry to 23 AF.



Col. John Tatom, Director of Safety.

more than other weapon systems and we want them to be very precise in doing it."

My next stop was with Col. John K. Tatom, Director of Safety. Colonel Tatom stated that "One challenge to flight safety in 23 AF is increasing mission demands while crew experience levels decrease." Colonel Tatom was quick to point out that, "Our commanders really provide the strength and guidance to complete the mission safely. Flight safety and successful mission accomplishment are getting a big help with some of the SOF improvements. Bringing on new aircraft and improving systems integration will keep 23 AF ready to go to war safely, with minimum losses."

No trip to a numbered air force is complete without going to see the "big picture" in the operations center. At 23 AF there's no large map on the wall showing channel routes or missions in progress; here there are displays connected to the Global Decision Support System (GDSS), large communications consoles, and three small maps. Maj. George N. Stokes, Jr. took me on a guided tour of the facility; he was very enthusiastic about GDSS and its capabilities. With flying units located in three theaters



Capt. Harold "Max" Maxwell checking message traffic.



Lt. Col. Lloyd Hinze writing the next 23 AF Mishap Review.

of operation, the staff is busy 24 hours per day with mission tracking. The closest 23 AF comes to scheduled channel missions are aircraves flown by 375th Aeromedical Airlift Wing crews; even those missions have variable routes. A typical day's schedule includes 48 OSA missions, 12 aircraves, 2 flight inspections, 35 AC/HC/WC/MC-130 missions, and 47 helicopter taskings.

Next stop during the visit was with Col. Ronald L. Jones, Director of Operations. Colonel Jones began by stating, "The special operations mission's regimes are inherently dangerous. Safety is an attitude, it can't be legislated or put in regulation. Our people in special ops are very safety conscious—they operate in a regime where a small mistake can have disastrous results."

He continued, "Our goal is to give crews the best equipment and training to get the best results. Simulators are becoming a very important part of providing training to our crews, who have had to use aircraft for procedures trainers in the past. Another benefit of simulators will be mission rehearsal,

it will let us see threats, help in planning, and improve mission success. Twenty-Third Air Force units are spread out all over the globe. Two new wings, the 39 SOW at Rhein-Main and 353 SOW at Clark, will help improve communications within each theater and between our units and supported commands. Improvements in mission training, systems reliability, mission planning, and mission rehearsal will lead to successful special ops missions."

I also stopped at the plans and programs shop to see what mods and changes were in progress for SOF aircraft. I spoke to Maj. Steve D. Saarela who handles MH-53s, sometimes called PAVE LOW III, a heavy-lift, night, adverse weather-capable helicopter. Many modifications are directed at better reliability, increasing ease of computer interfaces, and making AF SOF systems compatible with other SOF forces. All totaled, there are 43 modifications planned during the PAVE LOW III enhancement program, including several safety mods, such as crashworthy seats and

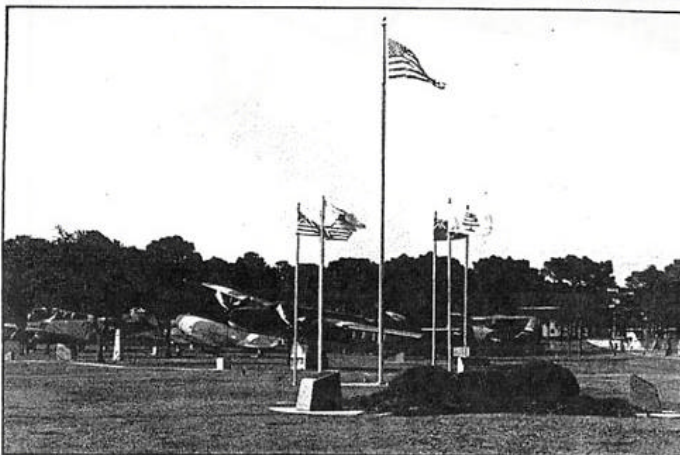
crashworthy external fuel tanks. Also included in the improvements will be ring laser gyro inertial navigation systems, making possible pinpoint insertion of special forces teams.

Helicopters aren't the only SOF aircraft to get modifications. Maj. Bryan L. Lillegard explained that HC-130P/N tankers, some C-141s, and C-130s are going to receive some SOF improvements as well. Mods for the C-141s and C-130s will upgrade a few aircraft to SOLL II configurations; most of the improvements will make these airlifters compatible with other SOF aircraft. For the HC-130s the improvements will mean improved tactical capability, flexibility, and OPSEC. Internal and external NVG compatible lighting will be going onto all three weapon systems, as will FLIRs and HUDs compatible with NVGs.

My final stop was with Brig. Gen. Hanson L. Scott, Vice Commander. General Scott started by saying "Flight safety starts with a strong training program, is enhanced by standardization programs, and then the credibility of our flight safety program." The general continued, "In 23d, safety guidance from the top is for unit commanders to be involved in mission planning. Special ops, by nature of its mission requires precise planning; a good safety record is a result of good planning." When asked which mission in 23 AF was most challenging, the general replied, "Most demanding—PAVE LOW, but all are demanding in different ways; AC-130s may not have as much low-level exposure; but they have other challenges, MC-130s making airdrops at 250 knots and 250 feet AGL at night is tough, and the HC-130 mission proves you can fly difficult missions safely with dedicated and professional aircrews."

With establishment of 23 AF in 1983, MAC became increasingly involved in special operations. This involvement includes not only dedicated SOF assets, but all elements of the MAC airlift system in support of unconventional warfare activities. There are no military airlift wings or tactical airlift wings in 23 AF, but there is airlift here, special airlift.

All great trips have to end and mine to Twenty-Third Air Force was no exception. I'm very grateful to the folks at 23 AF Safety for their fine southern hospitality, their help in arranging interviews and gathering information for this article.



Special operations aircraft museum.

