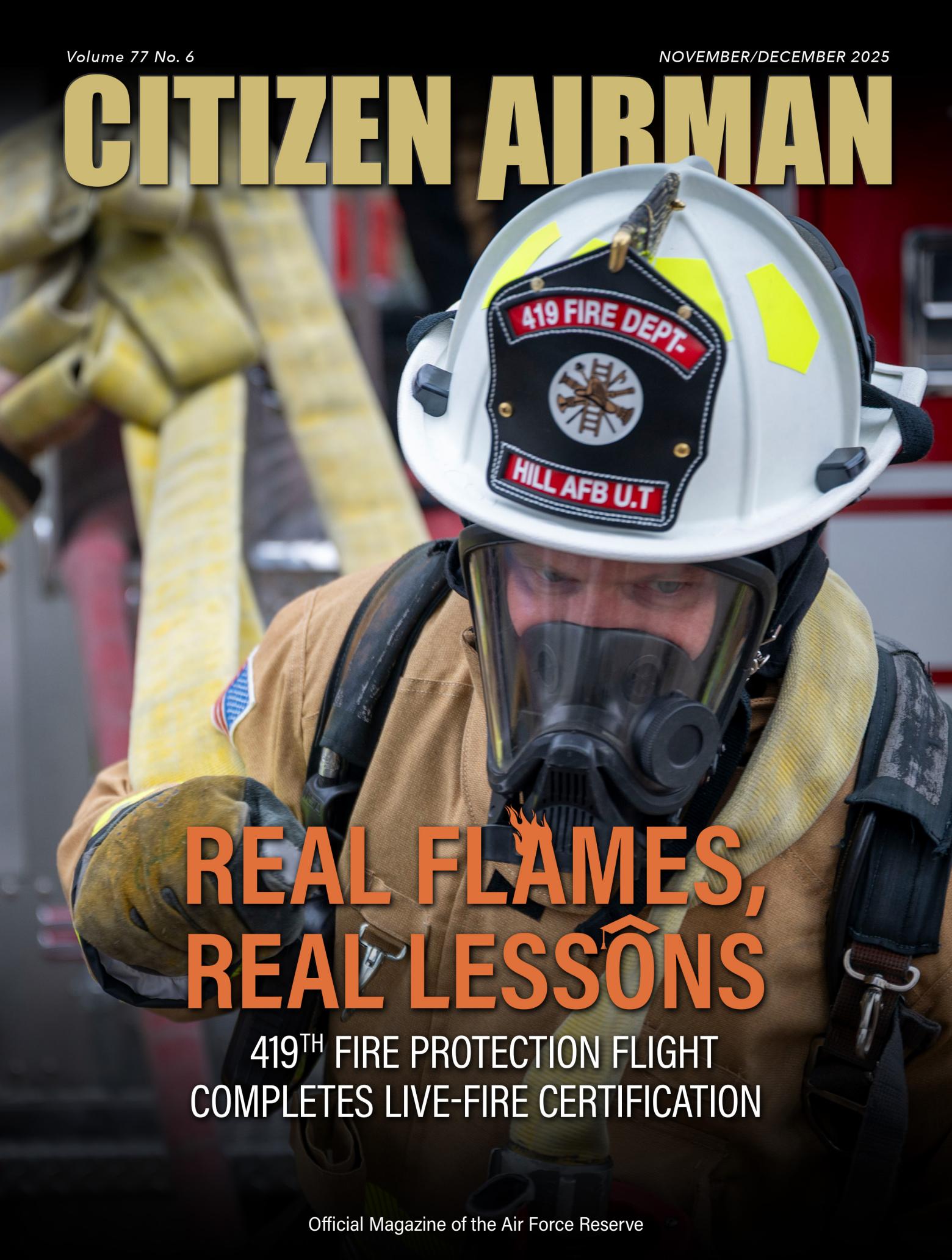


# CITIZEN AIRMAN



## REAL FLAMES, REAL LESSONS

419<sup>TH</sup> FIRE PROTECTION FLIGHT  
COMPLETES LIVE-FIRE CERTIFICATION



## FROM THE TOP

# TO THE AIRMEN, CIVILIANS, AND FAMILIES OF THE AIR FORCE RESERVE COMMAND,

Since my last commentary to the Command, there have been a lot of changes including a new Secretary of the Air Force, Dr. Troy E. Meink, and a new Chief of Staff of the Air Force, Gen Kenneth Wilsbach. With new leadership comes a new perspective on how we manage our Air Force. The Air Force Reserve will remain agile as missions we've executed for years may shift. We will continue to be the experts driving that change.

In today's complex global landscape, the demand for a combat-ready force has never been more urgent. Gen. Wilsbach has given us a clear and direct mission: to be ready to Fly, Fix, and Fight. This is not just a call to action for the active component; it is a mandate that every Airman must answer. We are, and will continue to be, an indispensable part of the Total Force, delivering on this charge with the professionalism and expertise that defines us.

Over the last year we overcame unique challenges as Citizen Airmen. Time and again, you went above and beyond to complete the mission; generating aircraft, training to match how we fight, and executing short-notice

deployments. Our commanders and finance professionals worked tirelessly to execute our \$7 billion budget at 99.8%, an unprecedented accomplishment. You met the challenge, and we fully executed our flying hour program for the first time in recent history. This success demonstrates the efficiency and effectiveness that is foundational to the Air Force Reserve. Despite the many obstacles thrown your way, you crushed it.

It isn't by accident that The Air Force Reserve is able to exceed expectations in the face of adversity. We achieve this by providing what I call "The Reserve Advantage," an unmatched combination of military experience and civilian expertise.

The Reserve Advantage exists because our Citizen Airmen are not only masters of their military craft but also leaders in their local communities and civilian professions. They bring a depth of knowledge from across the private sector including aviation, technology, logistics, medicine and countless other fields, increasing innovation and providing different perspectives on problem solving. This fusion of expertise is

a force multiplier, making the Joint Force more capable and lethal.

To ensure we deliver on CSAF's intent, we will continue to focus our efforts with that same intensity and capitalize on our strengths as we look forward.

Our primary focus, Generating Readiness, hasn't changed. This is the outcome of everything we do. This means we must streamline our processes to ensure you, our Airmen, are prepared for deployment faster and more efficiently. It also means modernizing our equipment and training to meet the demands of a high-end fight to ensure at the end of the day, when the nation calls, the Air Force Reserve remains ready.

We will achieve this by fostering a Warrior Culture defined by technical expertise, accountability and a strict, non-negotiable adherence to standards. This culture ensures we are all physically, mentally and emotionally prepared for the joint fight because we have trained and exercised to the highest level. Building interop-





*ISRAEL NUÑEZ*

Chief Master Sergeant, USAF  
Senior Enlisted Advisor to the  
Chief of Air Force Reserve  
Command Chief Master Sergeant,  
Air Force Reserve Command



erability with our partners and allies, we will train as we fight.

We will enhance the DAF's Surge Capacity by integrating Reservists into training, exercises and campaign planning. We will ensure Combatant Commanders know how to leverage mobilization authorities to maximize combat power and assure access to the Reserve Advantage.

At the same time, we will increase our Strategic Depth by advocating for the resources you need. Chief Nuñez and I are constantly engaging decision makers to drive recapitalization of our fleets. We cannot let our squadrons divest without a plan to put new, relevant weapon systems on our ramps. We are also pursuing a comprehensive Total Force retention strategy because we know our depth depends on our people and our platforms.

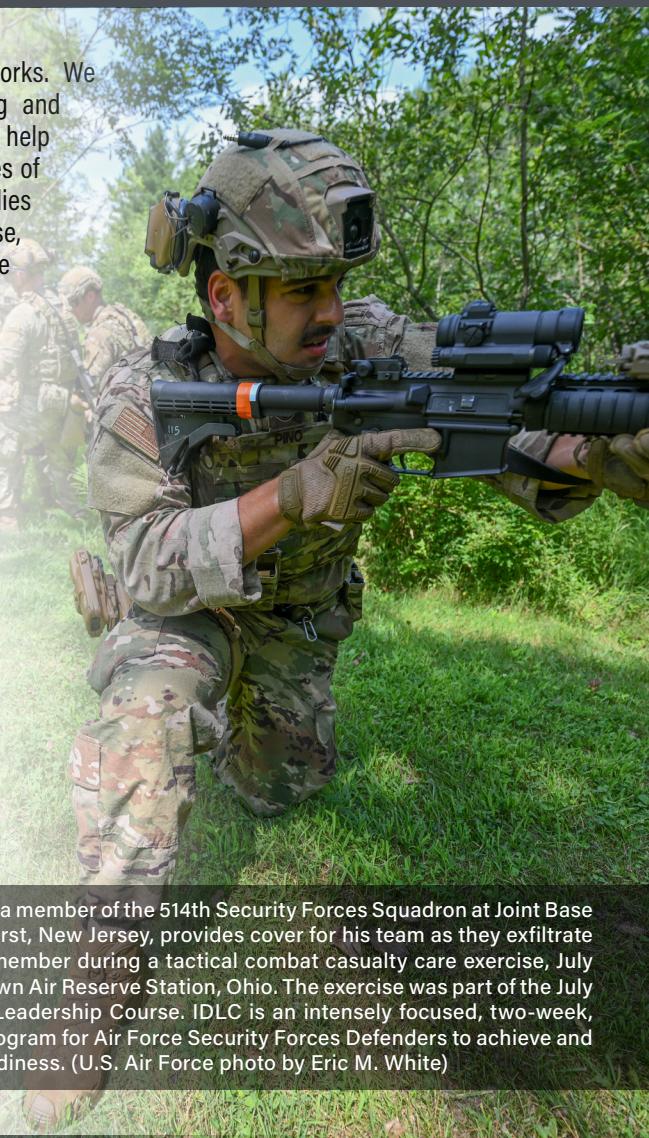
Finally, to better support our people and missions, we are getting after Force Mix Optimization. We are analyzing requirements to determine the correct balance of our full-time and part-time force. Our goal is to create a long-term, data-driven plan to structure our organization to meet current and future mission growth.

We will achieve all of this and more with a continued commitment to our Airmen and their families. We cannot Fly, Fix, and Fight

without strong support networks. We are committed to maintaining and growing resources designed to help families navigate the challenges of military service. Our strength lies in your dedication and expertise, grounded by the support of the home front.

The Air Force Reserve has a proud legacy of excellence. That is the Reserve Advantage, it is what makes us effective, efficient, accessible and lethal. It is the advantage our nation counts on, and it is the commitment each of us makes every time we put on the uniform.

Thank you to you and your families for your continued service and sacrifice. Let's get to work.



Tech. Sgt. Sean Pino, a member of the 514th Security Forces Squadron at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, New Jersey, provides cover for his team as they exfiltrate a wounded aircrew member during a tactical combat casualty care exercise, July 17, 2025, at Youngstown Air Reserve Station, Ohio. The exercise was part of the July Integrated Defense Leadership Course. IDLC is an intensely focused, two-week, hands-on training program for Air Force Security Forces Defenders to achieve and maintain combat readiness. (U.S. Air Force photo by Eric M. White)



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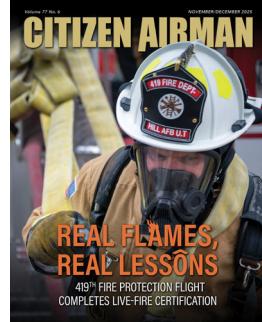
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*On the cover:* Lt. Col. Bradley Cowley, 419th Medical Squadron commander, performs an advanced hose pull with an attack line during live-fire certification Sept. 6, 2025. The 419th Fire Protection Flight completes annual live-fire certification to ensure Airmen meet Air Force standards for aircraft-incident and base-emergency response. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Anthony Pham)



MASTER SGT. BETHANY MARRERO



DENNIS SANTARINALA



AIRMAN 1ST CLASS SAMANTHA ROSSI

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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2025

# RESERVE AIRMEN OF THE 79TH ARS CARRY WARRIOR DNA INTO THE KC-46 ERA

— By 1st Lt. Touacha Her, 349th Air Mobility Wing

The story of the 79th Air Refueling Squadron began on the beaches of Normandy and continues today in the skies of the Pacific. From dropping paratroopers in 1944 to leading today's KC-46A Pegasus modernization efforts, Reserve Airmen of the 79th carry forward a legacy of innovation, lethality, and service that has endured for more than 80 years.

Part of the 349th Air Mobility Wing at Travis Air Force Base, California, the "Fightin' 79th" embodies the Air Force Reserve's heritage and its future. By pioneering KC-46A night vision operations, launching self-directed Agile Combat Employment training, and reconnecting with its D-Day roots through the restoration of the Night Fright C-47, the squadron demonstrates how Reserve Airmen honor the past while modernizing for the next fight.

That legacy was on full display in May 2025, when squadron members walked the same runway at Royal Air Force Membury where their predecessors launched into history on D-Day. Today, the squadron's KC-46A Pegasus tankers look very different from the C-47s that once flew over Normandy, but the mission is the same: deliver combat power when the nation calls.

## FORGED IN HISTORY

The 79th traces its warrior DNA to June 6, 1944, when the 79th Troop Carrier Squadron dropped paratroopers of the 101st Airborne Division over Normandy. One of those aircraft, nicknamed 'Night Fright', was nearly lost to history until a group of dedicated restoration experts in the United Kingdom began returning it to flying condition.

In May 2025, 79th ARS Reserve Airmen had the rare chance to step inside that aircraft during a heritage visit to England. For many, it was a moment of living history.

"When we visited the old RAF Membury runway where the 79th launched from the UK on D-Day—and walked inside the 79th's D-Day operated C-47 nicknamed Night Fright—we were able to touch living history and further reinforce the inspiration that our warrior Reserve Airmen appreciate," said Lt. Col. John R. Cuellar, 79th ARS commander.

Charlie Walker, owner of the aircraft, called the restoration "a living, breathing, flying memorial." He and his team expect Night Fright to return to the skies by 2026, with a standing invitation to appear at the Travis AFB Air Show on April 25–26.

That return will connect the community, the unit, and the public with a tangible reminder of the sacrifices and warrior ethos that continue to shape the 79th today.

## RESERVE AIRMEN IN TODAY'S FIGHT

Heritage alone is not enough. For the 79th, legacy is the foundation for innovation.

"As Reserve Airmen we juggle our family time, civilian jobs, and Air Force careers," Cuellar said. "Our adversaries do not care if we are part time. At the 79th, we understand it's our job to be ready to execute at the highest levels regardless of what status we are on."

That mindset has carried into the KC-46A Pegasus era. The 79th became the first Air Reserve Component squadron to qualify and maintain Night Vision Goggle operations on the new tanker—a critical capability for surviving and fighting in contested environments.

"It wasn't about accolades or being called 'the first,'" Cuellar said. "It was about being able to provide a combat credible, effective, and survivable force to bolster strategic deterrence—and if called upon like the 79th was on D-Day, defeat our adversaries."

## BREAKING BARRIERS WITH NVG TRAINING

Lt. Col. Gregg Boulanger, an instructor pilot and chief of training, was the first Reserve Airman in AFRC to complete the KC-46 night vision goggle Academic Instructor Course. His qualification allowed him to train not only Reserve Airmen, but also active-duty partners at Travis.

"Lt. Col. Boulanger is not only training Reserve Airmen but also training the active duty on NVGs," said Cuellar. "He went from being a Reserve Airman to embodying that Total Force model. It really shows one Team Travis, one fight."

Senior Master Sgt. Mike Parks, a boom operator with the 79th, called the transition bold and necessary. "To go into a new airframe with a new mindset and new operation of reality, bold steps must be taken," he said. "The focus in this squadron has been about taking those bold steps in areas that are tactically relevant."

*Continued on Next Page*





A KC-46A Pegasus, flown by an aircrew from the 79th Air Refueling Squadron, refuels three Royal Australian Air Force F-18 during a training flight. (U.S. Air Force courtesy photo)



U.S. Air Force KC-46A aircrew from the 79th Air Refueling Squadron conducts a night vision goggles (NVG) training demonstration at Travis Air Force Base, California, on March 20, 2025. Citizen airmen from the 79 ARS perform night vision goggle training to maintain proficiency in night flying missions. (U.S. Air Force photo by: Dennis Santarinala/ Released)

Chief Master Sgt. Matthew Fisher, senior enlisted leader, summed up the squadron's approach: "The 79th is not just blocking and tackling—we're pushing beyond the basics to fully leverage the weapon system's capabilities, to include NVGs. Even while still in conversion, the 79th is setting the standard and leading AFRC."

### INNOVATION THROUGH "BELLEROPHON WAYFINDER"

That willingness to take risks and "fail forward" led to an entirely new type of exercise for the squadron.

In 2025, the 79th launched Bellerophon Wayfinder, a self-initiated Agile Combat Employment event named after the mythological hero who tamed Pegasus. The exercise brought together Reserve maintainers from the 749th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, aeromedical specialists from the active-duty 60th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron, and survival specialists from the 60th Operations Support Squadron.

Maj. Michael Warzinski, the mission commander and squadron liaison with the Royal Australian Air Force, emphasized the importance of coalition integration. "Being able to land on a remote island airfield, ruck to establish a camp site with a small footprint, rest, refuel, and then fly thousands of miles to join up on-time with the Royal Australian Air Force for a mid-mission refueling of their fighters and electronic attack aircraft all on the premise of a squadron training sortie proves our mate ship and integration capabilities," he said.

"Our team decided that if we claim to be the gateway to the Pacific, we need to truly explore and own the Pacific," Cuellar said. That vision was carried forward by Lt. Col. Mark Garrison, the aircraft commander, along with planners Tech. Sgt. Matthew Johnson, Staff Sgt. Samuel Nolan, and Master Sgt. Glenn Brakel.

Johnson noted that the personal connections were as important as the operational achievements. "The only

part of the mission that outshined the training accomplishments were the relationships built both between our different Travis Squadrons and with our RAAF friends down under," he said.

Together, the team designed an island-hopping campaign that took Reserve and active-duty Airmen to Wake Island where they camped in tents while conducting water survival and Aeromedical Evacuation training, trained with Royal Australian Air Force EA-18G Growler crews off the coast of Brisbane, and integrated into Australia's ANZAC Day commemorations. They conducted special fueling operations in American Samoa and returned to Travis with NVG landings at night.

None of it came from higher headquarters tasking. The idea started in the squadron's heritage room during a conversation about what ACE in the Pacific might look like.

"That warrior spirit, ingenuity, and proactive problem solving can



be traced back to the 79th origins of WWII," Cuellar said. "It's derived from a need, not a luxury."

## HONORING THE PAST, READY FOR THE FUTURE

For Col. Joseph C. Romeo, 349th Operations Group commander, the lesson is clear: heritage, innovation, and Reserve Airmen culture are inseparable.

"Our Reserve Airmen are the connective tissue between past and future," Romeo said. "From Normandy to night vision, the 79th has always answered the call. Their heritage re-

minds us of what's at stake, and their modernization ensures we remain ready to fight tonight."

These efforts reflect the Air Force Reserve's enduring value: Ready Now! and Transforming for the Future. Reserve Airmen bring surge capacity, experience, and lethality at one-third the cost of the active component. Nearly 70 percent arrive with prior service experience, providing depth and expertise that strengthens Joint and Total Force integrated operations. Exercises like Bellerophon Wayfinder demonstrate how international partnerships and Re-

serve-led ACE training ensure the survivability of aircraft and crews in a near-peer fight—proof that the Reserve is efficient, experienced, accessible, and lethal.

The squadron's journey—from Night Fright to the KC-46A Pegasus—underscores the Air Force Reserve's enduring value. As the Travis community looks ahead to the 2026 air show and the return of a D-Day legend, the 79th continues to live its creed: Always Ready, Always Lethal, with Excellence in Reserve!

CA



U.S. Air Force Reserve Chief Master Sgt. Louann Cornel, 749th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, left, and Senior Airman Matthew Chan, 749th AMXS, right, inspect the nose gear tires of a KC-46A Pegasus at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii, April 27, 2025. The crew chiefs performed preflight checks to ensure the aircraft was mission-ready for its return flight to its home station, Travis Air Force Base, Calif. (U.S. Air Force courtesy photo)



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# EVOLVE

AIR RESERVE



PERSONNEL CENTER

## ARPC UPSTREAM SUPPLIER TO TRANSFORM FORCE SUPPORT ACROSS ARC

— By Lt. Col. Jessica Greening, IMA To Director Of Assignments, Headquarters Air Reserve Personnel Center

The ARPC EVOLVE Force Support Squadron Upstream Supplier Initiative launched July 11, 2025 across eight units—six Air Force Reserve Command and two Air National Guard, marking a bold step in standardizing operations across the Air Reserve Component.

### Participating Units

- 188 FSS (ANG), Fort Smith, Ark.
- 129 MSG (ANG), Moffett ANG Base, Calif.
- 94 FSS, Dobbins Air Reserve Base, Ga.
- 433 FSS, Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, Texas
- 434 FSS, Grissom Air Reserve Base, Ind.
- 459 FSS, Joint Base Andrews, Md.
- 919 SOFSS, Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.
- 944 FSS, Luke Air Force Base, Ariz.

Built on the success of last year's pilot with the 916th FSS, the initiative introduces EVOLVE's "chaos warfare" methodology to help FSS units convert disruption into decisive action. More than 100 Reservists and Guardsmen toured ARPC during immersion visits and unanimously echoed: "My unit needs this."

The initiative is designed to be manpower and cost-neutral, requiring minimal materials and offering maximum impact. The program's core focus is to maximize the effectiveness of existing resources by improving processes and leveraging digital workflows. The true investment lies in embracing the EVOLVE mindset and dedicating time to finding and putting improvements into practice. Backed by HQ AFRC/A1 Manpower and A9 Innovation Directorates and led by the ARPC Directorate of Human Performance and Development, this beta test focuses on two high-impact Lines of Production—evaluations for AFRC and DD214s for ANG. Each unit will work toward achieving bronze certification within 12–18 months via

the Maturity Validation Tool, with opportunities to scale success toward silver and gold benchmarks.

### EVOLVE Phases of Execution

- Phase 0 (Day 0–30): Identify, prioritize, and select mission critical Lines of Production for improvement (evaluations and DD214s).
- Phase 1 (Month 1–3): Build Gemba boards, complete Value Stream Mapping, finalize standard word documents and training plans, and begin regular Gemba walks.
- Phase 2 (Month 3–6): Submit units first EVOLVE Journey Report via ARPC SharePoint; A9 schedules site visits as needed; consider expansion to additional LOPs.
- Phase 3 (Month 7–12): Operationalize two to three LOPs; initiate MVT certification; publish quarterly EVOLVE Echo updates to showcase unit progress.
- Phase 4 (Month 13–18): Achieve bronze certification; advance toward silver/gold; receive plaque recognition from ARPC.

The EVOLVE initiative is already showing promising signs of progress as participating wings are actively identifying and implementing process improvements. The upcoming FSS submissions of the Journey reports will provide valuable insights into the impact of EVOLVE on LOP performance. The ARPC EVOLVE FSS Upstream Supplier Initiative represents a significant step forward in optimizing FSS operations and enhancing the service provided to Airmen. By embracing a production mindset and actively participating in the EVOLVE FSS US process, we can collectively build a more efficient, effective, and responsive FSS community.

EVOLVE continues to be more than modernization—it's operational excellence in motion.

Stay tuned for the update from Phase 1 from the FSS US!



# AFRC FIRST SERGEANT VACANCIES OFFER LEADERSHIP GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

CA

— By Tech. Sgt. Sean Evans, 514th Air Mobility Wing

Air Force Reserve Command transforms more than 100 First Sergeant vacancies across the force into career advancement opportunities for emerging leaders who want to make a difference in the lives of fellow Airmen.

The command actively recruits technical sergeants eligible for promotion and master sergeants to fill these critical leadership positions, which serve as the direct link between commanders and enlisted personnel.

"With over a hundred vacancies across Air Force Reserve Command, this is a real opportunity for our motivated leaders to step up and make a difference," said Chief Master Sgt. Eric Orndoff, command first sergeant at Headquarters Air Force Reserve Command. "These positions are absolutely critical. They're the trusted advisors to the commander, that vital link in the chain of command."

First Sergeants represent one of the most visible and impactful enlisted positions in the Air Force. The role offers participants the chance to influence squadron culture, support Airmen during tough times, and develop leadership skills that benefit both military and civilian careers.

"Taking on the First Sergeant role is far more than just a job. It's a professional milestone," Orndoff said. "The skills you develop in this position - leadership, empathy, conflict resolution, mentorship - they're invaluable. They'll benefit you in all aspects of your life, long after you take off the diamond."

The First Sergeant plays an indispensable role in ensuring squadron readiness, working closely alongside the Squadron Senior Enlisted Leader.



They bridge the gap between leadership's intent and mission execution at the ground level.

"The absence of a dedicated First Sergeant leaves a void in the squadron's support structure," Orndoff explained. "Without that dedicated expertise, the squadron may struggle to proactively identify and address potential issues."

Orndoff addressed common misconceptions about the role, emphasizing it extends far beyond administrative duties.

"One misconception is the notion that the First Sergeant role is primarily administrative. That couldn't be further from the truth," he said. "The core of the job is all about leadership. It's centered on people, readiness, and resilience."

Current First Sergeants across the command echo the transformative impact of the position. Master Sgt. Marco Andrade, First Sergeant of the 514th Civil Engineer Squadron, described how the role has been personally fulfilling.

"This position has been so personally rewarding to me by the people I have interacted with, the meaningful connections I have made, and the lives and careers I have personally helped," Andrade said.

Senior Master Sgt. Brian Cooke, First Sergeant of the 35th Aerial Port Squadron, noted the leadership skills developed in the position benefit both military and civilian careers. The skills even improved his personal life.

"My wife has even mentioned noticing a positive difference in my patience and the way I interact with our children since returning from the First Sergeant Academy," Cooke said.

Both First Sergeants emphasized the importance of proper motivation when considering the role. Andrade stressed the need for genuine commitment to helping others.

"My advice to anyone interested in applying for the position is to not only do it for the advancement of your career but also for the desire to make a positive difference in someone else's life," Andrade said. "This is a selfless position, and you have to go into it with that mindset."

Cooke reinforced that perspective, warning against pursuing the role for the wrong reasons.

"The role of a First Sergeant is rooted in selflessness and a genuine commitment to taking care of people," Cooke said. "If you approach it with that mindset, it can be the most rewarding and best position in the Air Force."

Interested Airmen can begin exploring opportunities by shadowing their current First Sergeant or attending First Sergeant Council meetings. Many successful candidates start as Additional Duty First Sergeants before transitioning to full time positions.

The application process includes an interview with the wing's Command Chief Master Sergeant and attendance at the First Sergeant Academy. Requirements include recent performance evaluations, current fitness scores, a CCAF degree or equivalent, medical clearance and official military biography.

Airmen interested in learning more should contact their current First Sergeant or Senior Enlisted Leader to discuss available positions and shadowing opportunities within their wing or across the command.

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U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. John Healy, chief of the Air Force Command and commander of Air Force Reserve Command, poses with members of the 349th Air Mobility Wing at Travis Air Force Base, Calif., Dec. 2, 2025, during the delivery of the 99th and 100th KC-46A Pegasus aircraft. (U.S. Air Force photo by Dennis Santarinala)



# TOTAL FORCE INTEGRATION MILESTONE WITH 99<sup>TH</sup>, 100<sup>TH</sup> AIR FORCE KC-46A PEGASUS DELIVERY

— By Erica Webster,  
HQ Air Force Reserve Command Public Affairs



From left, U.S. Air Force Gen. Johnny Lamontagne, Air Mobility Command commander, and Capt. Dustin Raab, 9th Aerial Refueling Squadron KC-46A Pegasus instructor pilot, fly the 100th U.S. Air Force KC-46A during its initial delivery to Travis Air Force Base, California, Dec. 2, 2025. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Dalton Williams)



ensures we can reach any spot in the world whenever and wherever our nation calls."

The new additions to the Air Force tanker fleet not only add an increased level of lethality to the Department of War but also serve as a force multiplier by extending the range combat aircraft can remain in the fight.

"The Pegasus represents a key chapter in air mobility, one built on innovation and unwavering commitment to the mission," said Lamontagne.

To meet the demands of complex and rapidly changing global environments, Reserve Airmen play a critical role in modernizing and strengthening the nation's air refueling capabilities, bringing a depth of experience and expertise to the Total Force.

"Our Citizen Airmen are a key component to the success of the KC-46A mission," said Healy. "They are fully integrated into every aspect of the program, from flight operations and maintenance to training and support."

The KC-46A operates out of five home stations in the nation, with Citizen Airmen working shoulder-to-shoulder with their regular component counterparts to keep the mission ready.

"The Air Force Reserve is a vital component of our air refueling enterprise," said Gen. Lamontagne. "Their expertise and dedication are essential to ensuring the KC-46A is ready to support global operations and maintain our strategic advantage."

CA

U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. John Healy, chief of the Air Force Reserve and the commander of Air Force Reserve Command, speaks to Airmen, industry and mission partners during the KC-46A Tanker 100th Delivery Ceremony, Dec. 2, 2025, at the Everett Delivery Center in Everett, Washington. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Dalton Williams)

The Air Mobility Command welcomed the 99th and 100th KC-46A Pegasus aircraft into the U.S. Air Force, during an arrival ceremony at Travis Air Force Base, California, Dec. 2, 2025.

In a visible show of Total Force Integration, Gen. Johnny Lamontagne, commander of the Air Mobility Command, and Lt. Gen. John P. Healy, commander of the Air Force Reserve Command and chief of the Air Force Reserve, delivered the 100th and 99th aircraft respectively, personally flying them to Travis AFB.

"The delivery of both the 99th and 100th KC-46As underscores the Air Force Reserves 'Ready Now' commitment to rapid global mobility," Healy said. "Our combined Total Force

U.S. Air Force Lt. Gen. John Healy, chief of the Air Force Reserve and commander of the Air Force Reserve Command, addresses Team Travis members in attendance at the ceremony marking the arrival of the 99th and 100th aircraft delivered to the Air Force at Travis Air Force Base, Calif., Dec. 2, 2025. (U.S. Air Force photo by Brittany Lauro)



# EXERCISE GALLANT TOWER: BREAKING NEW GROUND IN JOINT INTEROPERABILITY

— By Staff Sgt. Erica Webster,  
908th Flying Training Wing Public Affairs



U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Justin Parker, 71st Rescue Wing Squadron loadmaster, goes over exercise plans aboard a C-130J during exercise Gallant Tower at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., Sept. 5, 2025.(U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Erica Webster)



Exercise Gallant Tower brought together Reserve and active duty Airmen from the 908th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron, 71st Rescue Squadron, the 729th Airlift Squadron, and Soldiers from the Alabama Army National Guard Det 2C/111th General Support Aviation Battalion, for a joint patient-movement and refueling event unlike anything executed before in the state.

Held between Sept. 5-7, 2025, the exercise was designed and led by the 908th AES, to push ground and flying crew to operate in conditions that mimic future contested environments, scenarios they expect to face in emerging theaters.

The primary objective of Gallant Tower was to assess and validate the operational effectiveness of ground-based Unit Type Codes in support of aeromedical evacuation missions. By enhancing these capabilities within the Theater Aeromedical Evacuation System, the squadron sought to evaluate its ability to transition seamlessly from peacetime readiness to contingency operations.

This intense focus on ground interoperability was rooted in a critical observation: while aircrew members constantly train to maintain proficiency, the opportunities for ground personnel to get high-fidelity repetitions are significantly scarcer.

"We [flight crew] will fly and train all the time. We get so many reps and really good finished products," Capt. Kristian Taylor, 908th AES flight nurse noted. "Ground just doesn't get a lot of those opportunities, so this is about them."

Gallant Tower was not merely a simulation; it was a complex logistical ballet involving assets that rarely

train together in such a capacity. The exercise featured a Forward Armed and Refueling Point operation and complex patient movement scenarios involving Alabama Army National Guard HH-60M Black Hawk helicopters and an HC-130J Combat King II from Moody Air Force Base, Ga.

For the participants, this combination of forces was unprecedented.

"It was the first time that Army National Guard in Alabama conducted a [FARP] with an Air Combat Command asset," said Capt. Corey Reaves, 908th AES ground training officer in charge. "They've never done a ground [FARP] for my running C-130. That was something brand new for both parties."

The scenario flowed like a forward-deployed medical evacuation chain. The HH-60M's hot refueled – the process of receiving fuel with engines still running -- from the C-130J, while crew members shuttled patients from one aircraft to the other, giving both services practice under conditions that mimic the unpredictability of combat medical operations where speed and precision are matters of life and death.

A vital component of the exercise was the integration of the U.S. Transportation Command to validate the digital side of the patient movement chain using the TRANSCOM Regulating and Command & Control Evacuation System or TRAC2ES.

TRAC2ES manages the entire patient journey

from the point of injury to air evacuation and final treatment destination, providing essential situational awareness of casualties and medical assets across the theater.

"This kind of hands-on training rarely occurs here on site," said Reaves. "They helped the [Aeromedical Operations Team] build the mission packets and use the TRAC2ES system. It's something we use operationally but don't get to replicate and get reps on."

Receiving this level of training, the unit was able to verify their ability to maintain the digital data integrity, a necessity for sustaining the global medical evacuation network alongside the physical movement of patients during real-world conflict.

— *Continued on Next Page*



U.S. Air Force U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Christopher Hattendorf, fuel operators with the 23d Logistics Readiness Squadron, 23d Wing, Moody Air Force Base, Ala., carries a fuel hose to a helicopter during exercise Gallant Tower at Gadsden, Ala., Sept. 5, 2025. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Erica Webster)





Two U.S. Army HH-60M helicopters assigned to the Alabama Army National Guard, Det 2C/11th General Support Aviation Battalion, 29th Combat Aviation Brigade, 29th Infantry Division, land on an airfield during joint exercise Gallant Tower at Gadsden, Ala., Sept. 5, 2025. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Erica Webster)

The "why" behind Exercise Gallant Tower is inextricably linked to the changing nature of global conflict and aligns directly with the Air Force Reserve Command's priorities of being 'Ready Now!' and 'Transforming for the Future' giving units to look toward degraded environments involving scenarios where support is limited, communication is challenging, and teams must be self-sufficient.

To meet these future challenges, 908th AE leadership is pushing for maximum realism and stress exposure.

Taylor explained the push for more complex patient scenarios: "More max configuration, patient loads, max amount. Let's get more poly trauma impact patients...because...you don't want their first iteration to see something for the first time."

This focus on joint, multi-platform patient movement also fits squarely into the Agile Combat Employment concept ensuring Airmen can accomplish the mission.

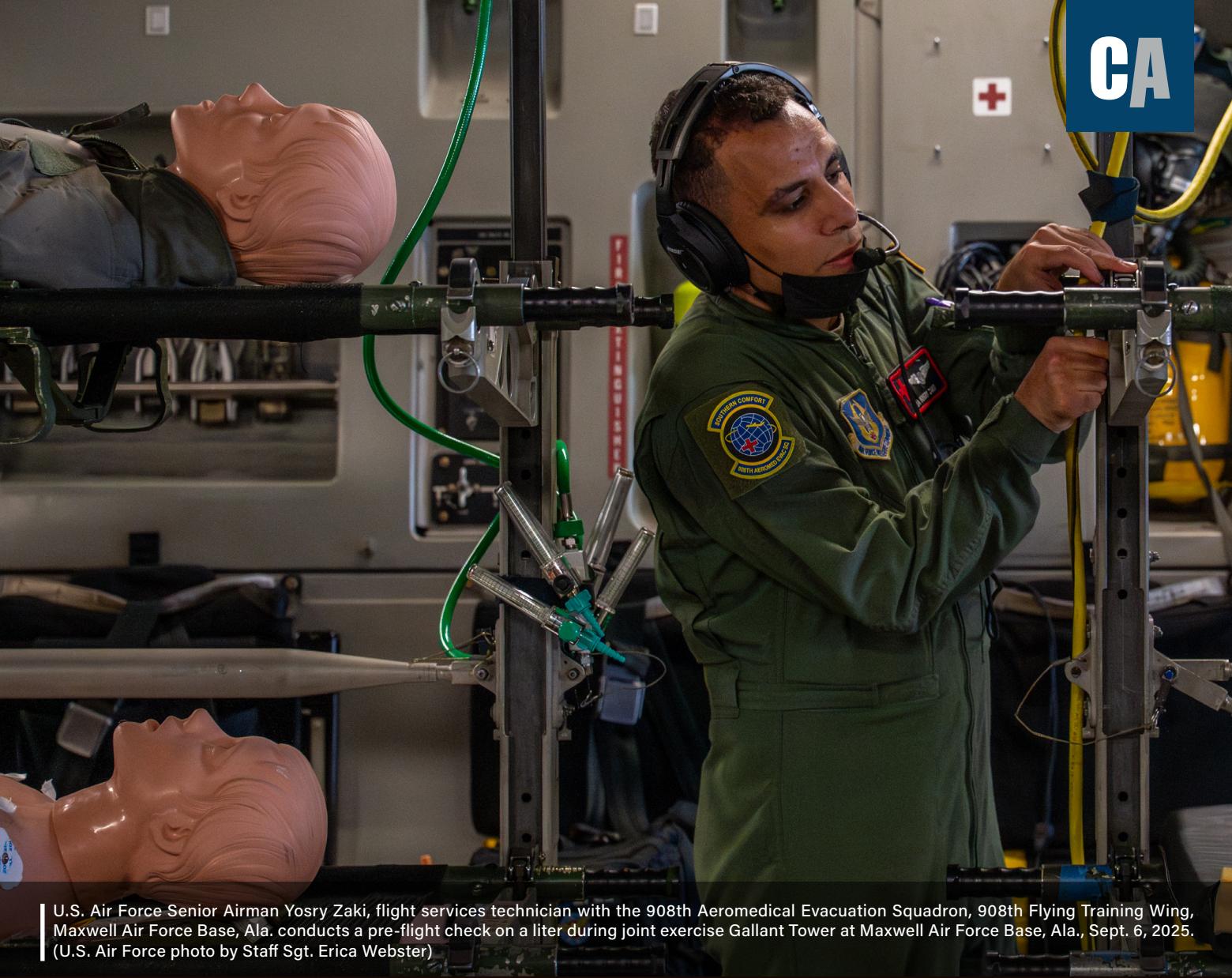
"When chaos happens, most people fall back to whatever their level of training is," said Reaves. "If we can provide a higher the level of training

for these real-life situations, they'll be better prepared. We need to train outside of our comfort zone to execute at a high level."

Pulling off an exercise of this magnitude was no small feat, particularly for a unit that does not possess its own organic aircraft for these specific missions. It required months of planning, coordination, and relationship-building.

"I think May was the very first email we sent out. It was three to four months of constant work," Reaves said.





U.S. Air Force Senior Airman Yosry Zaki, flight services technician with the 908th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron, 908th Flying Training Wing, Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala. conducts a pre-flight check on a litter during joint exercise Gallant Tower at Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala., Sept. 6, 2025. (U.S. Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Erica Webster)

The AE team also coordinated with 908th Flying Training Wing Safety, the Inspector General, and Standards offices to model the structure of major readiness exercises. Taylor explained, "We made a mealie and all these contingency plans to have all this in writing for it to be as legitimate to those exercises where one might look at it and say, 'This is a certifying event'."

The result was a training exercise that not only met but exceeded expectations, proving that with determination and vision, units can create high-value training opportunities internally without

needing to deploy to a flagship training center.

"It was more successful than we thought," he concluded. "Just with as many moving parts and different parties involved, you fully expect the hang ups along the way but ended up being a productive weekend for everyone involved."

As the 908th continues to pivot toward future readiness, Exercise Gallant Tower stands as a prime example of how unit-level innovation can drive the mission, ensuring that when the call comes, the ground forces are as ready as the aircraft they support. 



A U.S. Air Force maintainer assigned to the 1st Special Operations Wing performs pre-flight checks on an AC-130J Ghostrider gunship assigned to the 1 SOW at Hurlburt Field, Florida, Oct. 9, 2025. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Samantha Rossi)

# GHOSTRIDERS RETURN: RESERVE FLIES FIRST

— By Lt. Col. James Wilson, 919th Special Operations Wing

The thundering climb of an AC-130J Ghostrider over Florida's Emerald Coast Oct. 9, 2025, signaled the start of a new era for the Air Force Reserve.

For the first time in decades, the 919th Special Operations Wing flew an operational training mission in the Air Force's most advanced gunship, marking a return to its storied gunship heritage.

The flight was both practical and symbolic: a visible demonstration that the Air Force Reserve is back flying gunships in an operational capacity and fully integrated with its active-duty partners.

"Our Air Commandos are once again flying one of the most capable strike platforms in the world," said Col. Scott Hurrelbrink, 919th SOW commander. "The integration of the Reserve into the AC-130J enterprise ensures allows us to bring our deep operational experience to this platform as value-added mission partners."

The 919th's return to the gunship mission revives a powerful legacy. From 1975 to 1995, the wing operated AC-130A Spectre aircraft, conducting missions from Panama to the Persian Gulf. Nealy 30 years later, the return of a Reserve-led gunship squadron marks a full circle moment for the Air Force Reserve's only special operations wing.

The AC-130J's primary missions are close air support, air interdiction and armed reconnaissance.

"Transitioning back to our roots with the AC-130J mission allows us to expand the wing's capabilities and seamlessly integrate with active-duty aircrew and maintainers," said Hurrelbrink.

The association is not new to the 919th. The wing has long operated as an associate across multiple platforms. What is new is the full return to a gunship mission in an operational role. Reservists fly the same aircraft, train-





An AC-130J Ghostrider gunship assigned to the 1st Special Operations Wing taxis after landing at Hurlburt Field, Florida, Oct. 9, 2025. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Samantha Rossi)



A maintenance Airman assigned to the 1st Special Operations Wing marshals an AC-130J Ghostrider gunship assigned to the 1 SOW for takeoff at Hurlburt Field, Florida, Oct. 9, 2025. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Samantha Rossi)



A maintenance Airman assigned to the 1st Special Operations Wing marshals an AC-130J Ghostrider gunship assigned to the 1 SOW after landing at Hurlburt Field, Florida, Oct. 9, 2025. (U.S. Air Force photo by Airman 1st Class Samantha Rossi)

## AC-130J OPERATIONAL TRAINING MISSION

ing under the same readiness requirements and contribute maintenance capacity across both peacetime and surge operations.

Air Commandos in the 919th SOW and their active-duty maintainers are now working side by side to sustain those capabilities ensuring the wing can generate sorties, maintain proficiency, and surge when called upon.

For now, the wing's immediate focus is training to proficiency, building maintenance depth and participating in joint exercises with special operations ground forces.

"While we're exceptionally proud of this achievement, many challenges remain," said Hurrelbrink. "Increased training and readiness, building maintenance depth, becoming fully integrated with active duty and surpassing phased milestones are all priorities that will require laser like focus."

Aircrew in the Reserve led AC-130J unit are ready for what lies ahead.

"The first operational training sortie was what we've been building toward," said Lt. Col. Jason Fox, the Reserve's AC-130J squadron commander. "Every day we're integrating Reservists, maintainers and operational crews into a single team so we can continue on the path toward Full Operational Capability for the enterprise."

The new mission stands to provide AC-130J operators and maintainers options for continued service in the local community for many years to come. The 919th SOW's presence on the Emerald Coast spans more than 50 years and looks to continue for decades with this most noteworthy investment in the wing's future.



# REAL FLAMES, REAL LESSONS: 419<sup>TH</sup> FIRE PROTECTION FLIGHT COMPLETES LIVE-FIRE CERTIFICATION

Staff Sgt. Elisha Parker, 419th Fire Protection Flight fire officer, advances to the second floor to locate and remove simulated victims during live-fire certification Sept. 6, 2025. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Anthony Pham)



— By Tech. Sgt. Anthony Pham, 419th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

Heat shimmered above the Frank Forte Structural Training Grounds as 25 firefighters from the 419th Civil Engineer Squadron's Fire Protection Flight advanced lines, breached doors and pulled mannequins to safety during their annual live-fire certification Sept. 6, 2025. Senior leaders from the 419th Fighter Wing watched

closely as crews worked through the smoke, noise and chaos that mirror real-world aircraft and structural fires.

The full-scale exercise stressed realistic conditions: dense smoke, roaring flames and the disorienting loss of visual cues that can occur in an aircraft or hangar blaze. Crews practiced hose

advancement, search-and-rescue procedures and coordinated ventilation while trainers control burn patterns to replicate operational complexity.

"This isn't a drill in name only," said Tech. Sgt. Heather Carmody, a fire crew chief with the 419th Fire Protection Flight. "When you're flow-



ing water and putting out actual fire, communication changes, the heat changes how you move, and you have to trust your training and your crew."

"The flight's mission centers on safeguarding Airmen and critical assets to maintain base readiness. Many 419th firefighters bring dual experience to the job, serving as civilian firefighters and paramedics in the local community and applying that expertise to military operations. That blend of civilian and military experience strengthened the drills," said Bradley Klemesrud, 419th Fighter Wing Commander.

Certification evaluates individual and team proficiency across multiple tasks, from rapid interior search and rescue to tactical ventilation and coordinated suppression. Instructors measured performance under stress, ensuring members meet Air Force standards for response to aircraft incidents and base emergencies.

For leadership, attendance offered more than observation. The wing commander and senior staff stepped through parts of the exercise and debriefed with crews afterward, gaining a clearer view of operational demands and training shortfalls.

"Seeing leaders walk the course gives them firsthand insight into what our crews face," Carmody said. "It helps them make informed decisions about equipment, training time and investments that keep aircraft and Airmen safe."

Aircraft fire scenarios remain a top training priority because of the unique risks of fuel, confined spaces and critical systems, complicate suppression and rescue. Live-fire opportunities allow crews to practice extinguishment techniques, victim extraction and coordination with maintenance and operations personnel under realistic constraints.

The 419th Fire Protection Flight used the certification to validate current skills and identify areas for growth. Trainers documented lessons learned, including equipment placement, radio procedures and task sequencing, which will feed into future training cycles.

"Preparedness is not static," said Klemesrud who observed the exercise. "We must drill under the same pressures our members will face in a contingency environment. That realism saves lives and protects our mission."

With certification complete, the flight will continue routine training and pursue additional realistic scenarios to broaden readiness. The exercise reinforced a central message for leaders and Airmen alike: consistent investment in training and resources ensures the 419th can respond decisively when minutes matter.

Col. Bradley K. Klemesrud, 419th Fighter Wing commander, completes a primary search of a building with assistance from two 419th Fire Protection Flight firefighters during live-fire certification Sept. 6, 2025. (U.S. Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Anthony Pham)





# FEEDBACK FROM THE FIELD

— By Col. Gregory M. Kuzma, 419th Mission Support Group Commander



The alarm comes in the dead of night. Sirens echo across the flight line. Computer screens flicker, data feeds are corrupted, a suspicious video orders a mission stand down. Drones hover over fuel tanks. The fog and friction from modem threats blur command and control.

In that moment, what do you do? Do you wait to be told what to do or do you MacGyver a response?

In the 1980s TV classic, Angus "Mac" MacGyver never waited for the perfect tools. A paperclip, a gum wrapper, a strip of wire - those were his raw materials. What mattered was

his mindset: the ability to adapt and overcome. MacGyver's improvisation reflected the Cold War era, when resilience was the firewall against uncertainty. Today, in an age of Artificial Intelligence and deception, that same mindset must define our force from every Airman and Guardian.



Let's explore three modern threats and how Agile Combat Employment, a little Griffin Grit, and a MacGyver mindset ensure that when networks fail, the mission endures-because our people adapt and improvise.

## MACGYVERING THE ALGORITHM

The AI challenge is one of speed and predictability. An adversary's AI seeks rapid feedback loops to outpace our 'Observe, Orient, Decode, Act' loop cycle. ACE and the mission-ready Airman concept are our human countermeasures. Like MacGyver fashioning a device from common items, Airmen invent workarounds when core systems are compromised, introducing human unpredictability as a tactical advantage.

Imagine a cyber-attack severing a satellite uplink, targeting mission support tasks and flying schedules. The enemy expects centralized command and control to pause.

Instead, an aerial porter switches to analog manifest books and uses field radios from the cyber team. A civil engineer deploys backup power generators. A logistics team reroutes fuel with handwritten forms. This is resilience-the refusal to let broken systems break the mission.

Human initiative breaks the adversary's loop, restoring pace not by algorithm but by relentless adaptation.

## MACGYVERING COGNITIVE GRIT

Deepfakes are attacks on trust and authority. If a malicious deepfake video broadcasts a realistic video of a commander giving reckless orders, the resulting chaos severely degrades readiness.

An urgent voice message arrives, supposedly from the deputy commander, ordering personnel movement and pay redirection. It sounds real. A force support Airman pauses. She calls the deputy's secure number. No confirmation. She uses an au-

thentication process (a challenge - response code, for example) that is not validated. She alerts her supervisor. The message is declared fake before action is taken.

This is resilience in action; the grit to question, verify, and protect trust when deception strikes.

## MACGYVERING DRONE DENIAL

The rise of drone warfare has fundamentally changed the concept of the front line; our home base is no longer a safe haven. Attacks can target maintenance infrastructure or disrupt vital flight operations. When radios are being jammed and drones circle overhead, being resilient means dispersing vulnerability and ensuring redundancy across every functional area.

A security forces Airman recognizes drone signatures in real time-sound, silhouette, and flight patterns-and relies on low-tech observation posts with analog reporting when digital systems fail. In a drone attack, they establish perimeter checkpoints, coordinate with spotters, and improvise simple defenses to protect high-value targets. Their vigilance ensures base defense continues even when advanced detection systems are degraded.

This is resilience at scale; spreading risk and ensuring continuity even when advanced systems falter. Our home station has become a training ground for resilient improvisation.

## MACGYVERING MISSION COMMAND

When adversaries degrade computer networks and flood systems with false commands, reliance shifts to plan b: resilient C2 powered by human ingenuity and low-tech redundancy.

Instead of hesitating, Airmen act on Commander's Intent, MacGyvering the chain of command through trust and cohesion, not technology. Resilience here is collective-the cohesion that allows decentralized teams to act

decisively when authority collapses.

While our greatest vulnerability is often procedural rigidity-the inability to deviate from the established norm — our greatest strength remains the initiative and adaptability I have seen time and again from our amazing Airmen and Guardians.

## BUILD YOUR MACGYVER MINDSET NOW

When computer networks fail or orders seem suspect, resilience means acting with trained reflexes, not waiting for the perfect plan. Start now: train verification drills for deepfake orders. Plan analog fallbacks for every mission support area. Encourage lateral thinking and celebrate ingenuity as much as compliance. Resilience is not accidental-it is cultivated through tabletop drills, rehearsals, and the expectation that systems can fail.

MacGyver viewed constraints as puzzles to solve. That is our path forward. When systems break, we build new bridges, improvise new nodes, and restore purpose. If we fail to build this muscle, we risk paralysis and concede the OODA loop advantage to our adversaries.

Human resilience is timeless-it won the Cold War, and it will win the future fight.

*About the Author: Col. Gregory M. Kuzma commands the 419th Mission Support Group. He is a published advocate of ACE, resilience, and innovation. He believes resourceful Airmen — those who improvise, adapt, and persevere like MacGyver in human form - will shape the future force. The views expressed in this commentary are his own.*



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