

Air Force base in the 1960s protects area

The base helped keep our part of the world at peace.



In late 1968, F-106A Fighter-Interceptor Squadron Green Dragons Aerospace Defense Command and deactivated 325th Fighter Wing received the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award for exceptionally meritorious achievement in support of military operations for the period of June 1967 to March 1968.

- Courtesy Photo

By Shirley Ruble

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Why was an Air Force Base needed in Walla Walla from 1962 to 1974? Wasn't the military well established around the world? Whose unique idea was it?

Sgt. Don Schack was stationed at Paine Field near Everett, Wash. In October 1962, he received orders to go to Walla Walla. He drove through Othello and took U.S. Highway 410 to Walla Walla. Highway 12 was not constructed yet, and 410 went right down Walla Walla's Main Street. Signs pointed the way to the airport.

Schack reported to Master Sergeant Keene, active duty adviser to the Reserves, who said he heard a unit was coming in. As the troops arrived, six trailers were set up on the flight line. Personnel moved into small motels on Tausick Way and Isaacs Street.

“Work hours were from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m., but the men worked longer to get the job done,” Schack said.

They operated tractors with bucket loaders to clear out bunkers and fill them with nuclear missiles and air-to-air missiles. A perimeter was set around the base with signs that read: “Air Force Attachment. You Will be Subject to Search and Seizure.”

Vietnam

Few Americans were thinking of Vietnam in 1963. North Vietnamese communists attacked forces in South Vietnam. President John F. Kennedy sent military advisers to South Vietnam concerned if one country fell, all of the regions could fall, as noted in “Military Advisers in Vietnam: 1963, Historical Background and Context,” JFK Library.

On March 15, 1963, two Soviet bombers overflew Alaska. Short-range Alaska Air Command F-102s were unable to intercept them, states the 318th Fighter-Interceptor Squadron Green Dragons History, 1960-1983, p. 3. The bombers continued in U.S. airspace over Kuskokwim Bay for about 30 minutes. Ten F-106s were deployed from Geiger Field near Spokane to deflect them.

A dispersal base was activated at the Walla Walla City-County Airport by the 337th Fighter Group, Detachment 1 from Portland on Dec. 15, 1963. It was part of a project to ensure interceptor forces were ready in case of an enemy attack, the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin reported in “\$2.7 Million Allocated for Air Base Projects,” Oct. 14, 1964, p. 1.

“If McChord, Larson and Fairchild bases got bombed by any foreign countries,” Schack said, “we could fly F-106 Delta Darts at speeds of 1,400 mph out of here loaded with nuclear missiles.”

NORAD/ADNAC

From Jan. 1, 1966, to Jan. 1, 1967, NORAD and ADNAC maintained three phases of jet fighter capability at the Walla Walla dispersal base. Phase I allowed for “turnaround only” capability. Phase II progressed to Phase III, which provided six aircraft with nuclear capability “on high alert,” as stated in “North American Aerospace Defense Command and Air Defense North American Continent Historical Summary,” Declassified, Dec. 12, 2012, p. 123.

Lt. Col. Myrle N. Schuder commanded Detachment 2, 325th Fighter Wing, which reached full strength of 250 men by summer 1966. Military jets took off two at a time and made noise when they climbed from 0 to 20,000 feet in 90 seconds.

Schack recalls an episode when Schuder received a phone call at 2 a.m. from a woman on Sky-View Drive by Melrose Street.

She said, “The plaster just cracked on my wall. What are you going to do about it?”

Lt. Col. Schuder said, “Lady. Just listen. That sound you heard is the sound of freedom.”

The Air Force recognized citizens’ concerns over sonic booms in a Chamber of Commerce meeting at the Marcus Whitman Hotel, the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin indicated April 13, 1967, p.10. A film about the causes and effects of sonic booms was shown.

Capt. Ted Gooding from the Fairchild legal office explained the process of filing claims for broken glass and plaster cracks.

A safe place

“I don’t recall any disruptions during the time I was here,” Schack said. “People welcomed us and shouted, ‘Hi! How are you?’ We were very grateful to be a part of the community.

“The City League invited us to play baseball and softball. Warden Bobby Rhay bussed us to the penitentiary to play ball with the inmates. We enjoyed the games and good lunches afterward with fresh produce from the inmates’ gardens.”

About 10 airmen still live in Walla Walla. Some are retired from police and fire departments and the postal service. In 1964, Schack married his wife, Janet Shephard, a Walla Walla High School graduate who worked in the police department and later was a court stenographer. They have two children, Steve and Patrick, seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

“The City of Walla Walla was exceptional in the way they welcomed us,” Schack said. “The 325th Fighter Wing was a totally different experience for them. They weren’t fully aware of the reason for our being here was to keep our part of the world in peace.”

Shirley Ruble is a Whitman College alumna of merit and received a Pacific Northwest Writers nonfiction award. She is editor of Pioneer United Methodist Church newsletter and published “Washington Odd Fellows Home, From 1897 to the Present.”

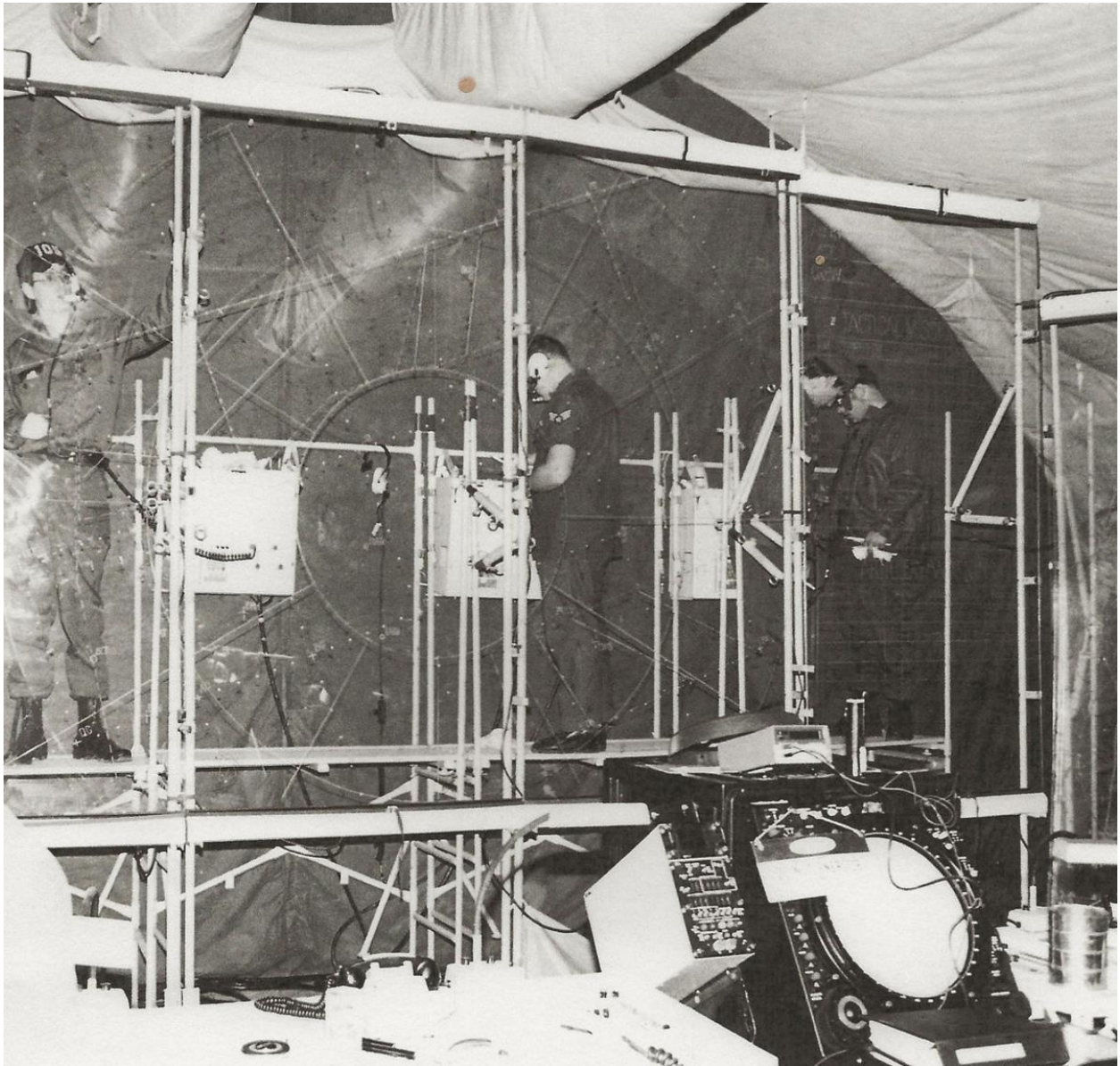


Baseball team from the 337th Fighter Group, Detachment I, played ball in the City League at Borleske Field. Warden Bobby Rhay, a member of the Reserve Unit, invited the team to play minimum-security inmates at the penitentiary and Borleske Field.

- Courtesy Don Schack (back row, third from left), 1964



Maj. Gen. William E. Elder (second from left), commanding general, 25th Air Division, McChord Air Force Base, is greeted by Walla Walla and Portland Air Force Base officers as he arrived for the dedication of the new dispersal base. With the general are Lt. Col. William W. Maitland, left, interim commander of the 137th Fighter Group Portland; Capt. Milton P. Loros Jr., commander, Detachment 1 of the 137th, Walla Walla; and Capt. Howard Ludwigs, chairman of Military Affairs committee, Chamber of Commerce.
- Courtesy U-B photo



Portable radar station equipment room at the Walla Walla Air Force Base as part of the Air Defense Command radar network.
- Courtesy of Don Shack, 1964