

## 623 AIR AND SPACE OPERATIONS CENTER



### **MISSION**

### **LINEAGE**

USAF Special Air Warfare Center established and activated, 19 Apr 1962  
Organized, 27 Apr 1962  
Redesignated USAF Special Operations Force, 8 Jul 1968  
Inactivated, 1 Jul 1974  
Redesignated Air Forces Special Operations Forces, 8 Dec 2005  
Activated, 13 Dec 2005  
Redesignated 623 Air and Space Operations Center, 1 Jan 2008

### **STATIONS**

Eglin AFB, FL, 27 Apr 1962-1 Jul 1974  
Hurlburt Field, FL, 13 Dec 2005

### **ASSIGNMENTS**

Tactical Air Command, 19 Apr 1962-1 Jul 1974  
Air Force Special Operations Command, 13 Dec 2005  
Twenty-Third Air Force, 1 Jan 2008

### **WEAPON SYSTEMS**

A-1, 1962-1971  
B-26, 1962-1965  
C-46, 1962-1964  
C-47, 1962-1974  
C-123, 1962-1974  
L-28, 1962-1968  
RB-26, 1962-1964

T-28, 1962-1972  
U-10, 1962-1974  
L-19, 1963-1964  
O-1, 1963-1971  
T-29, 1963-1974  
T-33, 1963-1974  
YAT-37, 1964  
H-21, 1965-1966  
UH-1, 1965-1974  
A-26, 1966-1967  
U-3, 1966-1967  
VC-47, 1966-1973  
VT-29, 1966-1967, 1971-1972  
AC-47, 1967-1972  
O-2, 1967-1974  
T-39, 1967-1974  
OV-10, 1968-1974  
AC-119, 1970-1974  
AC/C-130, 1970-1974  
QU-22, 1970-1972  
TC-47, 1970-1972  
UC-123, 1970-1972  
A-37, 1971-1974  
CH-3, 1973-1974

## **COMMANDERS**

MG Gilbert L. Pritchard, 27 Apr 1962  
MG Thomas C. Corbin, 1 Sep 1966  
BG Robert L. Cardenas, 16 May 1968  
BG Joseph G. Wilson, 11 Jul 1969  
BG LeRoy J. Manor, 18 Feb 1970  
BG James A. Knight Jr., 22 Feb 1971  
BG John F. Barnes, 1 Sep 1972  
BG William J. Holton, 6 Sep 1973-1 Jul 1974  
Col Richard W. Leibach, 13 Dec 2005  
Col Thomas D. Yanni, 24 May 2006

## **HONORS**

### **Service Streamers**

### **Campaign Streamers**

### **Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

## Decorations

Air Force Outstanding Unit Award  
1 Sep 2005-30 Sep 2007

## EMBLEM



USAF Special Operations Force emblem

623 AIR AND SPACE OPERATIONS CENTER emblem: Azure, a tactical target Proper two sky swords in saltire Argent all within a diminished bordure Or. Attached below the shield, a White scroll edged with a narrow Yellow border and inscribed "623D AIR AND SPACE OPERATIONS CENTER" in Blue letters. **SIGNIFICANCE:** Ultramarine blue and Air Force yellow are the Air Force colors. Blue alludes to the sky, the primary theater of Air Force operations. Yellow refers to the sun and the excellence required of Air Force personnel. The target symbolizes protection of freedom and is embossed with four air flight symbols going in all four directions, showing the unit's commitment to special air warfare and its mission. The sky swords represent aerospace power and the highly honed skills of Air Force personnel. (Approved, 22 Jun 1966, modified, 16 Mar 2006)

## MOTTO

## NICKNAME

## OPERATIONS

Carried out a diversified mission of training, indoctrinating, equipping, and administering air commando (later, special operations) forces; maintained a capability to deploy combat-ready forces on a worldwide basis. Trained USAF and Republic of Vietnam aircrews during the conflict in Southeast Asia. Developed doctrine, tactics, techniques and equipment for USAF and Special Operations Force units in the conduct of counter insurgency, unconventional warfare, and psychological warfare operations using a wide variety of aircraft. Carried out numerous major and minor humanitarian and civic action operations worldwide, deployed mobile training teams,

detachments and other personnel to critical sites as required. Also provided advice and assistance in the preparation and execution of foreign military assistance and air programs, including training indigenous air forces in overseas areas, and providing direct support to U.S. Army Special Forces by supplying air capability for resupply, infiltration, strike and reconnaissance operations. Establishment underwent a major reorganization in Jul 1968, when the center was redesignated and elevated to a numbered air force level. The 623d's mission changed in Jan 2008 to command and control of special operations assigned or gained forces, integration of joint mission information systems, and operation of the AFSOC Operations Center on behalf of the Commander, Air Force Special Operations Command.

Weather Unit Switch: The Air Force Weather Agency has turned over its former Special Support Operations Flight to Air Force Special Operations Command. Initially the unit will operate as Det. 1 to the 623rd Air and Space Operations Center at Hurlburt Field, Fla., and will move over the next several months from Offutt AFB, Neb., to Hurlburt. Toward the end of Fiscal 2009, it will also emerge as a squadron, the 23rd Weather Squadron. The unit's primary mission will remain the same to provide environmental products to deployed special operations forces. The squadron will be part of 23rd Air Force, AFSOC's warfighting headquarters established earlier this year at Hurlburt. "This makes lines of command and control much cleaner with special operations forces tasking special operations forces for weather support," said Lt. Col. Bryan Adams, 623rd AOC weather specialty team chief. And, he noted, that the unit would "be a key component" in upgrading airmen under the Air Force's recently created specialty code for special operations weathermen.

Air Force Special Operations Command inactivated 23rd Air Force, its former warfighting headquarters, during a ceremony at Hurlburt Field, Fla., announced command officials. "We realized it would be more efficient to reunite the staff under AFSOC," said Brig. Gen. Timothy Leahy, who led 23<sup>rd</sup> AF from August 2012 up until its inactivation, during the ceremony, according to Hurlburt's April 4 release. "Our people and our mission are what really matter, and that hasn't changed one bit," he added. Maj. Gen. George Williams, Air Force Reserve's mobilization assistant to the AFSOC commander, who led 23rd AF for part of 2010, took part in the flag furling with Leahy, states the release. Following the inactivation ceremony, the 623rd Air and Space Operations Center assumed 23rd AF's mission and took on a new name: the AFSOC Operations Center. AFSOC activated 23rd AF in January 2008 with the mission of providing highly trained air commandos to support combatant commanders worldwide. 2013

In 1961, General Curtis LeMay directed the creation of the 4400th Combat Crew Training Squadron (CCTS) at Hurlburt Field, Florida. The mission of the 4400th CCTS was to provide close air support for American Special Forces teams providing counter-insurgency training and FID in the Laotian interior. By 1961, the 4400th began missions in Vietnam under the code name "Farm Gate." The official mission of Farm Gate was to train South Vietnamese pilots for combat missions throughout the North and South; yet as hostilities escalated, the Farm Gate pilots soon found themselves engaged in combat operations throughout the region.

Air Force Chief of Staff, General Curtis E. LeMay, established the Special Air Warfare Center (SAWC)

at Eglin Air Force Base on 19 April 1962. The unit was composed of the 1st Air Commando Group (1st ACG), the 1st Combat Applications Group (1st CAG), headquarters section. The SAWC absorbed the men and assets of the 4400 CCTS and continued to operate Farm Gate.

The Special Air Warfare Center's mission: will command, organize, equip, train, and administer assigned or attached forces to participate in and, conduct combat improvement projects for air actions in counterinsurgency warfare and other special warfare operations. SAWC's major responsibilities included modifying existing equipment or inventing items for special warfare and providing forces for supporting, instructing, and advising friendly foreign forces in counterinsurgency warfare.

As the Vietnam War evolved, it affected the center's mission, eventually leading to a dramatic change in the mission. By 1973, TACR 23-12 defined the mission as simply two basic tasks: training and operating forces in Air Force special operations and training USAF and allied personnel as directed by Hq TAC or USAF. From the previously mentioned wide-ranging responsibilities, the mission changed to a narrow USAF training role. In its original concept, the Special Air Warfare Center conducted operations worldwide and had considerable autonomy; and during its early years, the center demonstrated the ability to conduct successful operations throughout the world by reacting quickly and flexibly to unusual demands. The special capabilities of this unit were discarded as the war in Vietnam became more conventional. The Vietnam War consumed SAWC's resources and funneled a multipurpose organization toward one end. Conventional tactics, such as interdiction, close air support, and reconnaissance, became the mainstay of SAWC operations in Vietnam. The Vietnam War quickly erased the difference between special air warfare assets and conventional air forces.

USAF special operations continued to expand along with the growing commitment to Southeast Asia. The 4400th CCTS grew into the 4400<sup>th</sup> Combat Crew Training Group (CCTG) in March of 1962, with a total strength of 1,800 personnel. On 27 April 1962, the Group was incorporated into the USAF Special Air Warfare Center (USAF SAWC). The mission of SAWC was To Provide command and staff supervision over assigned units engaged in training aircrews and maintenance personnel in operations and employment of aircraft for fulfilling the Air Force mission in counterinsurgency situations and the development, in coordination with other services, of the doctrine, tactics, procedures, and equipment employed by air forces in counterinsurgency operations.

To augment already assigned aircraft, additional assets were added to SAWC throughout the mid 1960s, including A-1, O-1, O-2, A-37, C-46, C-119, C-123, and later C-130 aircraft, along with numerous types of helicopters. 12 The SAWC, commanded by a general officer, reported directly to Headquarters, Tactical Air Command, at Langley AFB, Virginia, an arrangement which bypassed 9th Air Force as an intermediate headquarters." By early 1964, SAWC had grown from a small unit with limited resources to almost 3,000 personnel spread throughout the world, several hundred aircraft, and priority funding for its projects."

In an open letter to the U -S. Armed Services in the spring of 1962, President Kennedy said: The military challenge to freedom includes the threat of war in various forms, and actual combat in many cases. We and our allies can meet the thermonuclear threat. We are building a greater "conventional deterrent capability." It remains for us to add still another military dimension: the ability to combat the threat known as guerrilla warfare."

He directed the Secretary of Defense to "expand rapidly and substantially the orientation of existing forces for sublimated or unconventional wars." In response to this political pressure, the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Curtis E. LeMay, established the Special Air Warfare Center (SAWC) at Eglin Air Force Base on 19 April 1962. The unit was composed of the 1st Air Commando Group (1st ACG), the 1st Combat Applications Group (1st CAG), headquarters section. The SAWC absorbed the men and assets of the 4400 CCTS and continued to operate Farm Gate.

Formal announcement that USAF had established the Special Air Warfare Center was made in late April with prime emphasis on the fact that Air Commandos are being trained to instruct. Their mission is to help other people fight their own war, not to fight it for them.

Among the first detachments to be established was SAWC Detachment 3, located at Howard Air Force Base, Canal Zone. Beginning on 10 May 1962, Detachment 3 offered counterinsurgency training to any Latin American country that requested it. Detachment 3 sent mobile training teams throughout Latin America to survey the needs of countries that requested training. These teams analyzed what types of operations needed to be conducted and gave instruction in counterinsurgency air operations and civic action techniques. Detachment 3 was involved in numerous counterinsurgency and civic action projects. For example, in August 1962 an MTT went to Honduras to survey its needs for counterinsurgency and to train its pilots.<sup>14</sup> On another occasion an MTT installed wing racks for rockets on Guatemalan air force F-51s, resulting in a 600-percent increase in firepower.<sup>15</sup> On 5 October 1962, a mobile training team installed radio equipment at the airfield of David, a city in Panama, which gave the airfield necessary traffic control capability. Later, on 19 July 1963, the air commandos recovered and refinished an old ambulance and gave it to the city. The air commandos flew teachers into remote areas to instruct villagers in public sanitation and health. They flew a U.S. Army team into villages to drill wells and improve local agriculture. In December, they airlifted Christmas gifts to cities in Panama. In addition, the Detachment 3 air commandos tested equipment for the 1st CAG, such as a new set of target-marking rockets for use by forward air controllers. The tests went well; the air commandos reported that the rockets were effective for marking targets. Detachment 3 was successful in several other civic action programs. Their personnel provided medical assistance and evacuation in Panama and other Latin American countries. For example, in mid-1962 the 1st CAG developed a mobile medical dispensary. This 212-pound, three-piece unit fit easily in a U-10 light utility aircraft and contained almost all the necessary medicines and equipment needed for ailments encountered in a tropical environment. On many occasions, the air commandos of Detachment 3 flew into villages to give medical and dental care. From appendectomies to inoculations, the air commandos provided treatment that had never been available before. This type of civic action created much public support for both the

air commandos and the local government.

Events in Vietnam had a direct impact on the Special Air Warfare Center. On 1 July 1962, Detachment 3, renamed the 605th Air Commando Squadron (ACS) (Composite), passed to Southern Command's control. The removal of this unit from SAWC's control severely curtailed the center's role in training foreign forces. Now the only active training detachment of SAWC was Detachment 6 in Thailand. Detachment 5 was a CONUS-based unit whose major contribution was to STRICOM exercises; Detachment 4, located at Sembach, Germany, provided unconventional warfare support to United States Air Forces Europe. Toward the end of 1964, SAWC all but ceased its mobile training team activities.

On 1 August 1962, SAWC's mission, enabling the needs of the expanding organization to be met more easily and reflecting the reality of SAWC's activity in Southeast Asia. This change allowed special air warfare forces in certain instances to be used in counterinsurgency. A significant difference was that the directive authorized SAWC combat strike operations, which, early in 1962, Washington had admitted Farm Gate was doing.

An operations plan developed during this period reflected the conceptual thinking going on at SAWC. The center planned to develop a force capable of deploying within twenty-four hours to any area of the world. Once there, this force would possess the capability to operate in conjunction with and in support of U.S. or friendly forces in counterinsurgency, unconventional warfare, and psychological warfare operations. It was also to provide training to a friendly nation's air forces in those areas. Clearly, this seemed to be the appropriate mission for SAWC. The Special Air Warfare Center possessed its own resources for deploying mobile training teams on short notice and had the practical experience and expertise to develop effective working relationships with sister services and other national agencies. This capability never came to fruition, due to the increasing demands of Vietnam. Because of quantum increases in strike and airlift requirements for special air warfare assets, the role of SAWC shifted from training host nation forces to training USAF crews, thus reducing the emphasis on its mission of providing a combat and advisory ready force. The Special Air Warfare Center soon became very busy, with the "Special" part of its title increasingly ignored, replaced by the routine demands of what had become an expanding conventional war in Vietnam.

Between late 1962 and early 1964 SAWC grew from a small unit with limited resources to almost 3000 personnel spread throughout the world, several hundred aircraft, and priority funding for its test projects. The expanding effort in Southeast Asia absorbed more and more of SAWC's resources. For instance, Detachment 6 (Waterpump) was created and sent to Udorn, Thailand, in January 1964, trained the Royal Laotian Air Force, provided a nucleus of U.S. counterinsurgency forces near Laos, and stimulated the Royal Thai Air Force counterinsurgency program.

By the end of 1965, the Vietnam War was having a telling impact on SAWC. Trained USAF aircrews were needed to supplement the expanding effort in Vietnam. Still, the number one mission of SAWC was to train and equip USAF air and ground crews for operations in Vietnam. Although SAWC was supposed to provide mobile training teams to unified commands for training friendly foreign

air forces in counterinsurgency, this requirement was virtually ignored. From 1965 on, SAWC efforts would be almost solely directed toward Vietnam with only minor efforts for host country training and civic actions.

By late 1966, the war in Vietnam clearly had escalated to a conventional level with U.S. forces heavily committed to combat. The air commandos were not involved in counterinsurgency operations but mostly flew close air support missions. Even though the war in Vietnam had expanded far beyond an insurgency, SAWC people still held to the idea that training and deploying special detachments to train air forces of friendly foreign countries in how to use air power in counterinsurgency operations was a valid concept, particularly where conditions were different from those in Vietnam—i.e., a level of conflict lower than a conventional war. The emphasis on training USAF aircrews in the mid-'60s, forced SAWC resources into training people for the larger-scale war in Vietnam. By 1966, SAWC had become primarily "a combat training unit, preparing people for Air Force commands and a number of friendly foreign powers ... rather than training and maintaining combat ready forces ... for counterinsurgency or civic action missions in all parts of the world."

On 8 July 1968, SAWC was redesignated USAF Special Operations Force (SOF) and became the equivalent of a numbered air force. As operations in Vietnam became more conventional, the need for the Special Operations Force lessened. Ironically, the command billet was reduced from a major general to a brigadier general—a change incongruent with an apparent upgrade in organizational structure from that of a "center" to the equivalent of a numbered air force.

Brig. Gen. Gilbert L. Pritchard was named SAWC commander, and the 1st Air Commando Group (ACG) was reactivated under Col. Chester A. Jack. Also activated were the 1st Combat Applications Group (GAG), commanded by Col. Benjamin H. King, and the 4420th Combat Support Group, headed by Col. O.G. Johnson. The latter was authorized 900 men, the CAG a handful of R&D specialists and the operational organization, the 1st ACG, 800 men, of whom a few were already deployed to Mali and 140 to South Vietnam as Detachments 1 and 2, "Sandy Beach" and "Farmgate," respectively. In addition, a third detachment, "Bold Venture," was deployed in May to France Field in the Panama Canal Zone. "Bold Venture" was commanded by Lt. Col. (now Col.) Robert L. Gleason, who had earlier headed "Farmgate" in Vietnam.

When the USAF Special Air Warfare Center became too large and cumbersome for center status, it was elevated to a named air force.

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Air Force Lineage and Honors

Created: 2 Aug 2011

Updated:

Sources

Air Force Historical Research Agency. U.S. Air Force. Maxwell AFB, AL.

The Institute of Heraldry. U.S. Army. Fort Belvoir, VA.

Air Force News. Air Force Public Affairs Agency.