

F-104's in action during the Berlin Wall Crisis

The F-104A/B deployed to Europe during the Berlin Wall Crisis in 1961

During the fifties, there was a steady outflow of East Germans from the Soviet occupied East Berlin to the West Berlin. The reason was the shortage of essential goods and consumer items because of the dependence of heavy industries in East Germany while the West Germany was in swelling prosperity. The East German government was unable to stop this flow because the 4-power status of Berlin specified free travel between Berlin's eastern and western sectors. In the June 1961 meeting between President Kennedy and Soviet Premier Khrushchev in Vienna, the tension over Berlin intensified. Premier Khrushchev threatened to sign a separate peace treaty with East Germany which would end the existing 4-power agreements guaranteeing American, British and French access rights to West Berlin. He also stated that if US insisted on occupation rights after the treaty, US should expect the Soviet to meet force by force. Under this Soviet threat, President Kennedy returned to the US and started planning to mobilize the reserve units for active duties so as to strengthen US combat troops in Europe. The US Congress gave President Kennedy this requested power in August 1. 1961. Stirred by this crisis, the number of Germans leaving East Germany increased significantly, further draining the already depressed economy of East Germany. On August 13. 1961, the East German and Soviet troops closed all the crossing points between East and West Berlin, seal off the border first with fence and then with concrete wall topped with barbed wire.

On November 1, the Air Force mobilized three more ANG fighter interceptor squadrons. In late October and early November, eight of the tactical fighter units flew to Europe with their 216 aircraft in operation "Stair Step," the largest jet deployment in the Air Guard's history. Because of their short range, 60 Air Guard F-104 interceptors were airlifted to Europe in late November. The United States Air Forces in Europe (USAFE) lacked spare parts needed for the ANG's aging F-84s and F-86s. Some units had been trained to deliver tactical nuclear weapons, not conventional bombs and bullets. They had to be retrained for conventional missions once they arrived on the continent. The majority of mobilized Air Guardsmen remained in the U.S.

On August 30, 1961, President Kennedy ordered the National Guardsmen and Reservists to active duty in response to Soviet moves to cut off allied access to Berlin. He mobilized 28 Air National Guard (ANG) squadrons of which 11 were sent to Europe to reinforce USAFE. This included 3 squadrons of early model of F-104, one from the Arizona ANG, one from Tennessee ANG and one from South Carolina ANG. These 3 ANG squadrons received their F-104A's and F-104B's between February and July of 1960 from the Air Defense Command. They were all under the control of 140th ANG Wing and were based at the following ANG bases in the US:

In late October and early November, eight of the tactical fighter units flew to Europe with their 216 aircraft in operation "Stair Step," the largest jet deployment in the Air Guard's history. Because of their short range, 60 Air Guard F-104 interceptors were airlifted to Europe in late November.

Arizona Air National Guard	197th FIS	Skyharbor Airport, Phoenix, Arizona
South Carolina Air Guard	157th FIS	McEntire ANGB, Eastover, South Carolina
Tennessee Air National Guard	151st FIS	McGhee-Tyson ANGB, Knoxville, Tennessee

The 3 F-104 ANG squadrons were officially mobilized on October 1, 1961. Since the F-104s lacks the range and had no in-flight refueling capability, they were airlifted to Europe by MATS Douglas C-124's in November 1961 under "Operation Brass Ring". Their missions were to conduct air superiority and offensive air support operations if required to defend West-Berlin.

In Europe, these squadrons were assigned to USAFE. The Arizona ANG 197th Fighter Interceptor Squadron (FIS) and Tennessee ANG 151 FIS were assigned to Ramstein Air Base in West Germany under the 86th Air (Defense) Division of the 17th Air Force. The South Carolina ANG 157 FIS was assigned to Moron AFB, Spain under the 65th Air Defense Division.

In addition to the F-104A's, each ANG squadron also sent 2 F-104B's along for proficiency training while stationed in Europe. Unfortunately, a few F-104A's and F-104B's crashed and were written off during their deployment in Europe. The tension ended in the summer of 1962. These 3 F-104 squadrons were officially demobilized in August 15. 1962. Shortly after, they were redeployed back to their home bases in the US. Within about a month after the 197th FIS's F-104A/Bs were returned to the States, they were transferred to the other 2 ANG F-104 squadrons. This is because the mission of the 197th FIS AZ ANG was changed and it was re-designated 161st Air Transport Group flying the C-97 Stratofreighter.

From the Air Force Record Cards, the following F-104A and F-104Bs were identified to have been deployed to Europe between 1961 and 1962.

Arizona ANG 197th FIS at Ramstein AB

F-104A (18): 56-773 (attrition compensation to 151 FIS), 56-779, 56-782, 56-784, 56-791, 56-793, 56-795, 56-808, 56-809, 56-810, 56-816, 56-818, 56-821, 56-823, 56-826, 56-832, 56-833, 56-860
F-104B (2): 57-1301, 57-1308

note: 56-809 crashed June 18, 1962 after an aborted take-off from Ramstein AB, Germany; right main gear tire failure during take-off, right hand wheel caught fire during abort; pilot evaded safely, airplane was damaged beyond economical repair by fire.

F-104 Starfighter-USA-Berlin crisis

Tennessee ANG 151st FIS at Ramstein AB 1961

F-104A (18): 56-813, 56-814, 56-822, 56-824, 56-830, 56-831, 56-834, 56-846, 56-848, 56-851, 56-852, 56-861, 56-870, 56-872, 56-876, 56-880, 56-881, 56-882

F-104B (2): 57-1302, 57-1306

note: 56-813 and 56-848 were both involved in a mid-air collision on March 19, 1962 during a GCA instrument approach into Ramstein AB a mile west of Ramstein AB

note: 56-881 crashed March 21, 1962 northwest of Wiesbaden AB during deployment "Stair Step" operating out of Ramstein AFB, Germany, the aircraft entered uncontrollable flat spin, , recovered momentarily at 20,000 feet and resumed a flat spin, pilot Pierce ejected safely

Tennessee ANG 151st FIS at Ramstein AB in May 1962

56-773 (attrition compensation from 197 FIS May 1962), 56-814, 56-822, 56-824, 56-830, 56-831, 56-834, 56-846, 56-851, 56-852, 56-861, 56-870, 56-872, 56-876, 56-880, 56-882

F-104B (2): 57-1302, 57-1306



151st FIS: The Deployment

Among those whose lives were disrupted by the Berlin Crisis of 1961 were the Air Guardsmen of the 151st Fighter-Interceptor Squadron at McGhee Tyson Air Force Base in Knoxville, Tenn. Alerted in August for possible recall to active duty, members wound up their private affairs and prepared to go, but for a while, activation looked unlikely. Then orders came on October 9, 1961 to report for deployment November 1. For the past year, the squadron, which was part of the 134th Fighter-Interceptor Group, had flown the stubby-winged F-104A Starfighter, called "the Zipper" for its blazing Mach 2 speed. The active duty force had F-104Cs and had passed the F-104A, which had been operational only since 1958, to selected Guard units.

The commander, Maj. Robert W. Aiken, led an augmented squadron with the group's 18 F-104A fighters, its two F-104B two-seat proficiency trainers, and about half of the unit's personnel in the deployment to Ramstein AB, West Germany. Most of the others activated went elsewhere, including to bases in France to fill in understrength Guard units.

The F-104A did not deploy for long distances in the conventional manner. It needed frequent fueling because of its short operating range, and unlike the F-104C, it could not be fitted with a refueling probe to gas up from a KB-50 tanker. The standard procedure was to take the airplane apart and airlift it to the new location.

Fortunately, the F-104 was easy to disassemble. The entire tail assembly, including the aft fuselage behind the wing, came off as a unit to allow removal of the engine. The forward fuselage was winched aboard a C-124 through the big cargo door in front and stowed according to the predetermined loading plan, surrounded by the tail, wings, and nose.

By November 20, the squadron was at Ramstein, ready to operate. Performance was excellent from the beginning, as the veteran Guardsmen were highly qualified.

In May 1962, the squadron set a record, both for US Air Forces in Europe and for the Air Force as a whole, for the highest flying time per jet fighter aircraft assigned for any one month. The average of 46 hours, 27 minutes was built by 17 fighters flying the entire month with the 18th aircraft joining in on the last day.

As the deployment rolled on, dozens of the airmen and all except eight of the officers brought their families to Ramstein. Since their dependents were not officially sponsored, they lived on the local economy and the Guardsmen did not receive quarters or subsistence allowances to help with the expense. There was no problem, though, in enrolling their children in the US Army schools at Ramstein. The 151st FIS returned to McGhee Tyson in July 1962 and was released from active duty August 15, 1962.

South Carolina ANG 157th FIS at Moron AB

F-104A (10+8?): 56-771, 56-844, 56-849, 56-854, 56-856, 56-857, 56-858, 56-862, 56-866, 56-871.

See note 5: (56-827, 56-829, 56-841, 56-863, 56-864, 56-865, 56-867, 56-878)

F-104B (2): 57-1310, 57-1311

note 1: 56-0841 crashed on December 9, 1961 during deployment "Stair Step" at Moron AB, Spain, after engine failure (compressor stall) 3 NM SE of Malaga, Spain, pilot Capt Billingsley ejected safely

note 2: 56-0864 crashed on January 5, 1962 during deployment "Stair Step" at Moron AB, Spain, after running out of fuel in bad weather 13 NM north of NAS Rota, Spain, while diverting to the alternate

note 3: 56-862 crashed on June 2, 1962 during deployment "Stair Step" 8 NM SSE of Cordoba, Spain, aircraft flamed out in flight after fuel starvation due to main fuel control malfunction

note 4: Two-seater F-104B 57-1311 crashed on January 29, 1962 during deployment "Stair Step" after engine failure on a 2 NM final for Rwy 21 at Moron AB, Spain

note 5: AF records show that some of the 157th squadron's F-104A's were transferred to Europe in mid 1962 and not in late 1961. Therefore, it appears that the 157th squadron might not have the full allotment of 18 F-104A's in late 1961.

note 6: These 8 F-104A's were assigned to 157th FIS but record cards did not explicitly document that they were deployed to Europe or their post-1961 entries were missing. However, other information and circumstantial evidence strongly suggest that these 8 F-104As were likely to have been deployed to Europe along with the other 10 157th FIS F-104A's. Input from readers to confirm or disprove the transfer of these F-104As to Europe is kindly solicited.

Author's notes:

1. This is not an article on the complete history of the 1961 Berlin Wall Crisis. Just sufficient historical information is provided to allow readers to get up to speed on the background of the conflict that prompted US to send 3 squadrons of F-104s to Europe. Author encourages comments from readers who might have more information about this deployment to share with everyone.

2. USAF ANG website (<http://www.ang.af.mil/history/heritage.asp>) states that in all 60 F-104's were deployed to Europe during the Berlin Crisis. However, the author can only positively identify 10 F-104A's from 157th FIS deployed to Europe based on explicit entries in the record cards. Taking into account of the missing 8 F-104A's from 157th FIS based on information and circumstantial evidence, it will fit the grand total of 60 F-104's which would consist of 3 squadrons with 18 F-104A's and 2 F-104B's each.

The F-104C/D deployed to Europe during the Berlin Wall Crisis in 1961/1962

434th TFS "Red Devils" 479th TFW

August 14, 1961 to Moron AB, Spain,

September 25, 1961 to Bitburg AB, Germany until December 17, 1961

Inactivated January 3, 1962, to become the initial F-104G training squadron and was designated 4443rd CCTS and moved to Luke AFB as the initial German/NATO F-104G unit

56-0908, 56-0910 (to October 1, 1961), 56-0911, 56-0912, 56-0913*, 56-0914, 56-0920, 56-0921, 56-9024, 56-0926, 56-0929, 56-0937, 57-0910 (from October 1, 1961), 57-0911, 57-0924

F-104D: 57-1332, 57-1334

56-0913* crashed on take-off from Moron AB, Spain on August 28, 1961, the pilot was killed

The 434th was on a routine deployment to Moron in August 1961, but they did not leave Moron AB for Bitburg AB until September 25, which was four days after the 435th TFS arrived at Ramstein AB on September 21, 1961 (by Bob Messerli)

Bob Noack deployed to Bitburg with the 434th TFS during the time frame of F-104 deployments to Germany (by Bob Messerli)

435th TFS 479th TFW

September 19, 1961 to Ramstein AB, Germany from George direct, until January 22, 1962

56-0886, 56-0887, 56-0902, 56-0904, 56-0927, 56-0928, 56-0934*, 56-0935, 56-0936, 56-0938, 57-0912, 57-0915, 57-0921, 57-0923, 57-0925, 57-0926*, 57-0927, 57-0930

F-104D: 57-1332*, 57-1334* (from 434th TFS)

* stayed to the end of the period

Also received 56-931 back from damage repair while at Ramstein and it was flown back to George AFB at this time

(56-0886 was seen at Toul-Rosieres Air Base Air Show 1961)

The 435th, commanded by LtCol Frank J. McGuinness, launched on September 19, 1961. I recall we hit KB-50 tankers over Kansas and landed at Myrtle Beach, then continued on to Bermuda. The following day (September 20, 1961) we flew on to Lajes with two air refueling over the Atlantic. From Lajes we flew to Moron, Spain and the following day (September 21, 1961) continued up to Ramstein Air Base. I recall the landing at Ramstein very clearly, as I was flying wing and my lead had to go around as it was quite hazy and we weren't well lined up. (by Keith Davey)

Keith Davey was on the same deployment with the 435th TFS, but he was in a different flight than mine. It should be mentioned that when we departed Moron, Spain for Ramstein we were armed at the end of the runway before taking off for Ramstein. We were not certain of what kind of reaction or reception we would receive from the Soviet Migs across the border in East Germany upon our arrival. We flew direct non stop over France and landed at Ramstein Air Base 21 September 1961 (by Bob Messerli)

436th TFS 479th TFW

January 18, 1962 to Hahn AB, Germany from George AFB direct, until April 12, 1962

56-0894, 56-0896, 56-0898, 56-0901, 56-0918, 56-0919, 56-0920, 56-0933, 56-0934*, 56-0937, 57-0910, 57-0911, 57-0913, 57-0916, 57-0918, 57-0922, 57-0926*, 57-0928

F-104D: 57-1332*, 57-1334* (from 435th TFS)

* from 435th TFS, stayed to the end of the period

The 434th TFS deployed from George to Hahn Air Base, shortly before the 435th redeployed back to George AFB and the 436th had a full squadron of 18 aircraft deployed with them. When they arrived at Hahn, I went from Ramstein to Hahn for a period of one month to provide Theatre indoctrination of German air control procedures to their pilots. (by Bob Messerli)

476th TFS 479th TFW

April 8, 1962 to Hahn AB, Germany taking over 436 equipment, until August 10, 1962

56-0894 (436th TFS, ylo!) at RAF Sculthorpe, UK May 19, 1962

56-0894 noted Open House Kleine Brogel June 24, 1962

56-0899 noted at Finningley, UK 1962

56-0901 noted at RAF Wethersfield (EGVT), UK May 19, 1962

copyright:

Zipper Nr.49/24 W Yip

compiled by:

Hubert Peitzmeier

references:

Aeromilitaria Spring 2004, via Powell, Martin
F104_Operation_Stair Step_TAC_page1.jpg
F104_Operation_Stair Step_TAC_page2.jpg
F104_Operation_Stair Step_ANG_page1.jpg
F104_Operation_Stair Step_ANG_page2.jpg
F104_Tennessee ANG during the Berlin Crisis 1961-1962.pdf
F104_Berlin crisis_AFM 09.2011.pdf

March 20, 2014