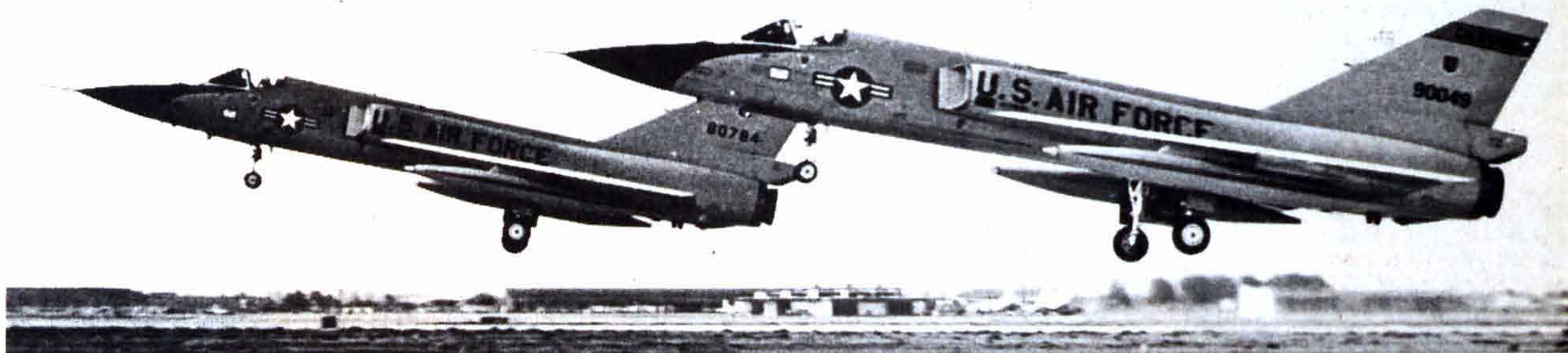


Air Guard 'scrambles' to defense



Lieutenant Ron "Aileron" Yelton (left, prepares to take off on a practice intercept of a B-52 off the California Coast. These missions, which usually take about two hours, are typical of what the Air National Guard uses to keep its pilots flightready. The F-106s (right), are nearing the end of their stay in

Fresno and will soon be replaced by the F-4D Phantoms. The Phantom, besides having two pilots and two engines, has four extra weapons mounts and a 20 mm cannon which will give the Fresno Squadron a greater dogfighting capability.

JEFF OLSEN
Insight reporter

Air National Guard Lieutenant Colonel Dave Cobb was on a waiting list for a year-and-a-half before he was assigned flying duties with the Guard in 1968.

Second Lieutenant Ron "Aileron" Yelton worked in squadron operations four years before he was selected for flight training.

Both Cobb and Yelton, F-106 pilots with the Fresno squadron of the Air National Guard's 144th fighter-interceptor wing, agree that becoming a pilot, especially a jet fighter pilot, takes a great deal of determination and perseverance.

"To become a pilot takes desire, dedication and perfection. Perfection is standard," said Cobb, who has been a professional pilot for 21 years. "You have to have a certain amount of stick-to-it-iveness."

Yelton, the youngest of the Fresno '106' pilots, said, "I think everyone needs goals. My goal was flying."

Cobb began his professional flying career 21 years ago with the U.S. Air Force after graduating from CSUF. A native of Fresno, Cobb was a member of the Air Force ROTC unit on campus and received a commission as a second Lieutenant during February 1962 shortly after graduation.

Cobb remained on active duty, which included flying missions over Southeast Asia in F-105 Thunderchief strike fighters, until 1966 when he left the Air Force and returned to Fresno to help run his family's ranch.

Along with running the ranch, Cobb took a "second job" flying for Pan American Airlines in 1967 and a

year later he also started flying for the Guard. Cobb has since left Pan Am and is currently flying for Fresno's newest airline, Pacific Express. He is the captain of one of Pacific's Rolls Royce-powered DAC 111 jet airliners.

Cobb simply states, "Flying has been my life."

Yelton, a 1977 CSUF graduate, took a much different route into the cockpit. After being turned down by the Air Force because he "lacked the technical background required for pilots at the time," he enlisted in the Guard with hopes of eventually being selected for flight training.

Four years of determination and hard work finally paid off and Yelton was sent to flight school. Now flying almost full-time with the squadron, he sums up his success by saying, "I'm getting paid to have fun."

The mission Cobb and Yelton perform when flying the F-106 Delta Dart fighter-interceptor is an important one for the security of the U.S. As the name "fighter-interceptor" implies, the Guard's primary mission is to intercept any unidentified or hostile aircraft entering U.S. controlled airspace, thus providing the country's first line of air defense.

In order to maintain a continual state of air defense readiness, the Fresno squadron has two F-106s on alert 24 hours-a-day. The two "alert" planes are fully armed with "live" weapons and are guarded by sentries with M-16 rifles.

The Guard pilots take turns being alert and, should the signal be given, can be in the plane and ready to fly in a moment's notice. When the signal to "scramble" is given, the planes will

be in the air in five minutes heading for its targets.

The order to "scramble" is given by the Air Defense Command located in Arizona. The Command, known as "Arizona Pete," monitors a network of radar installations along the Pacific coast which watch for any unidentified aircraft.

Should an aircraft fail to properly identify itself, the order to "scramble" is given to the squadron nearest the target. Other squadrons of the 144th are located at George AFB in southern California and in Portland, Oregon.

Once they are scrambled, the Fresno F-106s, capable of speeds over 1,500 miles per hour, or Mach 2, can reach the Pacific coast in less than 15 minutes. According to Yelton, the F-106 is known as the "cadillac of jet fighters."

Like Yelton and Cobb, the majority of Guard pilots are part-time and have other occupations — anything from airline pilot to grocery store manager. Because the Guard is mostly part-time, with only a small full-time staff, they can provide air defense at half the cost of a regular Air Force squadron. Air National Guard units throughout the U.S. provide the nation with more than 60 percent of its front line air defense.

Although on the surface the Guard's duties may sound relatively simple, it is a task that requires an extensive amount of training and expertise. Were the Guard to have a motto, it might be something like "practice makes perfect."

"Being a professional pilot is the same as being a professional athlete or a doctor," explained Cobb. "You

have to practice, practice, practice. You have to have the desire for perfection and use the equipment as it was designed to be used."

If there is one thing the Guard does a great deal of, it is practice. Each day the Fresno squadron flies 10 to 12 training missions with the average pilot flying three times a week. Overall, the Fresno based F-106s are in the air approximately 500 hours every month, quite an accomplishment considering most of the planes are more than 20 years old.

Because the planes are so old, they require extra maintenance to keep them in good shape.

"The Air National Guard has probably the best maintenance crews of any of the services," said Captain Jim McNab, who worked in maintenance before becoming a pilot. "They do a great job keeping these planes in good shape. That really makes a difference when you're flying."

Unlike active duty Air Force squadrons, which have a high turnover rate among ground personnel and pilots, the Guard is able to maintain an extremely high level of experience because they are able to keep the same people for much longer time periods. Many Guard pilots have well over 3,000 hours flying time in high performance jets, quite a lot by anyone's standards.

Whether they have 3,000 or 300 hours, all of the Guard pilots have one thing in common, the desire to be as close to being the "perfect" pilot as possible.

"We take great pride in what we do here," said Cobb. "That's pretty much characteristic of any professional."



Lt. Yelton climbs aboard his F-106 Delta Dart to store his flight gear for the day's mission, which is a typical practice exercise.