

California Air National Guard's 144th Fighter Wing protects skies

144th Fighter Wing pilots based in Riverside and Fresno race to the skies in the blip of a radar screen to check out potential threats over California. Their guns and missiles are 'hot.'

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An F-16, which can reach speeds up to 1,500 mph, is guided in to the California... (Al Seib, Los Angeles Times)

President Obama was aboard his Marine One helicopter flying to a celebrity-studded fundraiser in Holmby Hills last February when a single-engine plane, flying radio silent, breached a no-fly zone over Los Angeles.

An ear-piercing horn rocketed Capt. Luke Campagne to his feet 50 miles away. His G-suit already strapped on, Campagne sprinted out of a windowless, cinder block barracks at Riverside's March Air Reserve Base to an F-16 fighter jet waiting in a hangar.

Within minutes, two Fighting Falcons screamed over Hemet, then banked west toward Long Beach, crossing the Santa Ana Mountains at a hair below supersonic speeds — guns and missiles "hot."

Civilian pilot Brian Choppin was putting along in his little Cessna, a tidy 13 pounds of marijuana tucked in the back, when one, then two fighter jets tore by his wing.

"I assume he was a little stressed out," said Campagne, who then guided Choppin toward Long Beach Airport, where police officers took him into custody.

Campagne is among a cadre of California Air National Guard pilots who stand vigil over the Southwest airspace 24 hours a day, ready to respond to an event on the scale of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks — or any other airborne threat. The unit is part of a military air defense web over the United States, alerted by the North American Aerospace Defense Command's pinpoint radar systems tracking every aircraft in the sky.

Teams of pilots from the 144th Fighter Wing are based in Riverside and Fresno, sleeping, eating and waiting inside drab quarters that have all the charm of a Siberian bivouac. Their F-16s sit in open hangars just yards away, prepped and ready, weapons armed.

"It's a no-fail mission, 24/7, 365 days a year. Every time, we have to get it right," said wing commander Col. Sami Said. "Our response time is extremely, extremely quick."

Though response times are classified, the F-16 can hit speeds of 1,500 mph — so, once in the air, the Riverside-based jets can reach downtown Los Angeles or the San Onofre nuclear power plant in less than three minutes, or be over the Las Vegas Strip in less than 10. Those times will be even faster when the wing converts to F-15s over the next year.

More than a decade after two hijacked airliners hit the World Trade Center Towers, the nation remains in a state of emergency. Even today, fighter jets patrol in the skies during high-profile events such as the just ended Republican National Convention in Tampa, where only military, law enforcement and rescue aircraft were allowed within three nautical miles of the venue.

NORAD has scrambled jets more than 1,500 times nationwide since 9/11 — triggered in the vast majority of cases by small planes unknowingly veering into restricted air space or flying significantly off course.

If those incidents occur in California or parts of Nevada, responsibility falls to the California Air National Guard's 144th Fighter [Wing](#), headquartered at Fresno-Yosemite International Airport. But scrambling for errant aircraft isn't all the wing does: With more than 1,000 personnel, it supports U.S. Air Force operations in Afghanistan and a host of other worldwide and local missions, among them search and rescue operations, wildfire fighting and disaster preparation.

The wing's 32 fighter pilots rotate shifts in heavily secured "alert" stations in Fresno and Riverside.

Col. Reed Drake nursed a cup of coffee in the small dining room of the Riverside barracks on a recent workday. He was pulling a weeklong shift, down from his home in Fresno.

Because he's on alert duty, he cannot leave the barracks and has to stay rested and ready. He reads, checks his email, studies the latest military updates for pilots. The facility has a row of dimly lighted utilitarian bedrooms. Not a ray of natural sunlight enters the complex, although it is equipped with a large screen television and recliners, as well as a free weights, treadmills and other gym equipment that rival most neighborhood YMCAs. But the atmosphere is far from relaxing.

If a "blip" on the radar cannot be identified, the blast horn sounds.

"Trust me, you take quick showers," Drake said.

Strict protocols dictate what fighter pilots can do when responding to an alert. In the air, they are in constant contact with commanders at NORAD, who call the shots. The primary task of the fighters is to identify the aircraft — looking at tail numbers, trying to raise the aircraft's pilot by radio — and assess whether it poses a threat. Most often, the fighter pilots are told to divert an aircraft out of a no-fly zone or guide a disoriented flier to a safe landing spot. In the case of a terrorist threat, an order to open fire would come from NORAD.