

Air Guard girds for Russians

Fresno pilots may meet 'Bears' in sky

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Bee staff writers

Fresno Air National Guard pilots, who have long ruled California's coastal skies unchallenged, have been warned that they may soon face encounters with Soviet bombers.

U.S. defense strategists fear that an airstrip under construction in Nicaragua could become a base for Soviet military planes, providing the ability to fly snooping missions along the western United States similar to Soviet patrols along the East Coast.

"It would not be unexpected once that [Nicaraguan] base is there, that our Guard units would be flying a similar role to units on the East Coast," said Fresno Air Guard spokesman Lt. Col. James A. Arthur.

For years, Soviet bombers have flown missions along the East Coast. U.S. jet fighters regularly intercept the intruders and escort them away.

Air Guard officials said that Soviet military crews flying off the East Coast have been cautious to avoid warlike maneuvers.

Fresno Air Guard pilots are now being told they may have similar duty if the 10,000-foot Nicaraguan airstrip at Punta Huete is transformed into a refueling stop for Soviet planes.

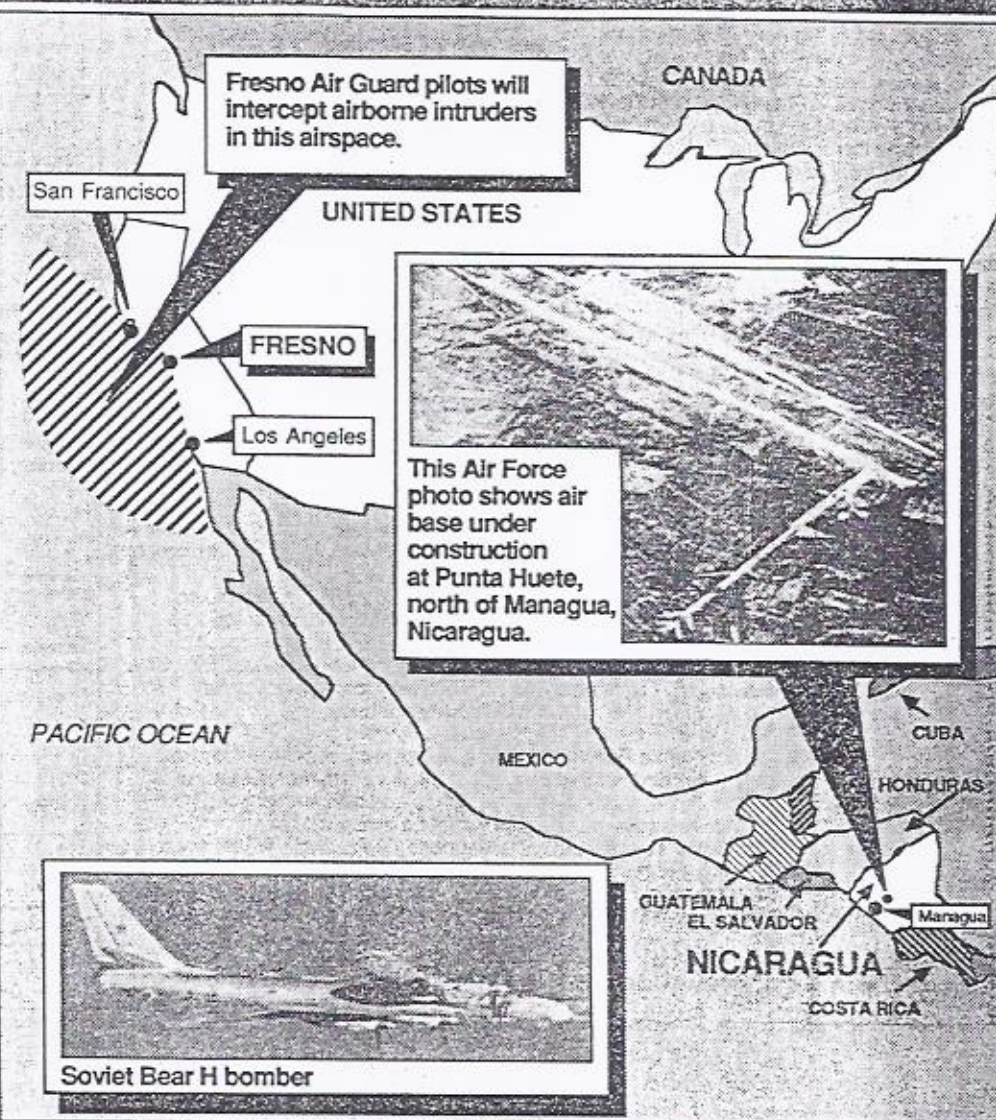
"It's just the refueling capability that's been the only limitation," Arthur said.

Nicaraguan and Soviet officials have consistently denied intentions of using the Nicaraguan airstrip for military purposes.

But Reagan administration officials have warned of the possibility since construction first began on the airstrip in 1982.

In defense analyses, a base in Nicaragua, combined with midair refueling, could provide the means for Soviet air patrols of the U.S.

Fresno Air Guard's defense role



West Coast. Soviet aircraft could take off from Siberian bases, cruise down the U.S. coast, land in Nicaragua for refueling, then return across the Pacific.

Pentagon officials would not comment on reports that U.S. West Coast defenses were being enhanced in response to the potential of new Soviet activity.

However, a modernization program for West Coast Air Guard

units is currently under way. The Air Guard now has responsibility for most of the air defense of the continental U.S. and Hawaii.

In Fresno, the scheduled replacement of the Air Guard's 22-year-old F-4D Phantoms with up-to-date F-16s recently was moved up to early 1989 from an original delivery time in 1990 or 1991.

Air Guard facilities at the Fresno Air Terminal also were given \$6.5

million for improvements.

A spokesman for Rep. Charles "Chip" Pashayan, R-Fresno, whose office announced the F-16 program in February, said he knew of no connection between the Fresno Air Guard enhancement and the Nicaraguan airstrip.

An Oregon Air Guard satellite unit of the Fresno-based 144th

Fresno Bee/John Alvin

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