

History of the 6th



1919 - PRESENT



Above: Members of the 6th Composite Group stationed in Panama, circa 1927.

The 6th Air Refueling Wing traces its roots indirectly back to the early years of American military aviation when its predecessor was organized in 1919. Initially named the 3rd Observation Group, the unit was redesignated as the 6th Composite Group in 1922 and assigned to France Field, Panama Canal Zone.

From 1922 to 1936, the 6th Composite Group served as a headquarters unit for the defense of the Panama Canal Zone. Those early Airmen flew patrol missions, conducted maneuvers, and participated in goodwill flights to Central and South America. The 6th evolved throughout its long and illustrious history, and along the way there were many changes to its name and mission.

Towards the end of the 1930s, a major change in the group's mission foreshadowed the future. In 1937, it was renamed the 6th Bombardment Group – the designation it carried into World War II. For most of the next 15 years, it carried that name in one form or another. The Group continued to operate in the Canal Zone until October 1943, when it inactivated because the demands of the American war effort required its presence elsewhere. After returning to the United States for training, the 6th Bombardment Group relocated to North Field on the small island of Tinian in the Pacific by the end of 1944. As part of the Twentieth Air Force, planes carrying the 6th's pirate emblem struck major targets in Japan and numerous kamikaze bases in the surrounding islands. The Group received two Distinguished Unit Citations for contributions in the campaigns against Japan that brought an end to World War II.

After the war's end, the Group eventually relocated to Kadena, Okinawa, where it deactivated in October 1948. The Air Force briefly brought it back from January 1951 to June 1952 before inactivating it again. This marked the end for the old 6th Bombardment Group. When it returned in 1985, the Air Force renamed it the 6th Operations Group.



Above: Crews of the 6th flew training missions at Dalhart Army Airfield, Texas in 1944 as they prepared for the war in the Pacific. Many of these crews later flew bombing missions from the island of Tinian.

Below: The 6th painted their emblem on Charles Lindbergh's plane, the Spirit of St. Louis, when he visited their base, France Field, Panama in 1928.





6th Air Refueling Wing

The 6th Wing (1951- Present)

In the early 1950s, the Korean Conflict and the Cold War resurrected the need for aerial bombardment. Using the name of the old Group, the Air Force created a new unit, the 6th Bombardment Wing (Medium) and assigned it to Walker AFB, New Mexico. This new version of the 6th flew the formidable B-36 “Peacemaker” and later the B-52 “Stratofortress” bombers. As the Soviet missile threat increased during the Cold War, so did the 6th Wing’s mission. From 1962-65, the newly re-designated 6th Strategic Aerospace Wing maintained an intercontinental ballistic missile (Atlas) squadron. However, Walker AFB closed in 1967, and the Wing moved without personnel or equipment to Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska.

In Alaska, the 6th Strategic Wing – later the 6th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing until 1988 – flew reconnaissance missions with the state-of-the-art RC-135 aircraft. The Wing also flew aerial refueling assignments as part of the Alaskan Tanker Task Force, and supported numerous Air Force and Navy exercises. In addition, the Wing maintained a detachment at Shemya Air Force Station in the Aleutian Islands, and operated there from 1975-76 when Eielson closed for repair of earthquake damage.



Left: The 6th Wing flew the RC-135E reconnaissance jets while stationed at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska.

Right: A Strategic Air Command patch, top, and an Air Force officer’s pilot wings pin worn at Walker AFB.

In 1994, the 6th headed back south. Following the termination of the Air Force’s fighter mission at MacDill AFB, Florida in 1993, the 6th reactivated there as a base support wing in January 1994. This soon changed after MacDill played an important role in U.S. operations to restore democracy in Haiti in September that year. Congress called for the retention of the airfield and, as part of the deal, assigned an aerial refueling squadron to relocate to MacDill. The 6th then became an Air Refueling Wing. Five years later, the Air Force assigned another facet of air mobility to the Wing. In January 2001, the 6th Air Mobility Wing began providing airlift and transport services to the combatant commanders stationed on base and elsewhere who played vital roles in the Global War on Terrorism. Efforts to streamline the Department of Defense in the late 1990s eventually led to a change in operations. As part of these changes, the Air Force Reserve’s **927th Air Refueling Wing** relocated to MacDill. In 2008, they began joint operations with the 6th Air Mobility Wing. This new team showcased their abilities to support relief operations in the Caribbean during an earthquake in 2010 and again during the 2017 hurricane season. In 2017, the 6th Operations Group added a second air refueling squadron, making it capable of deploying entire air refueling squadrons in support of global contingency operations. On 30 September 2019, the 6th Operations Group celebrated its centennial, and the 6th became once again the **6th Air Refueling Wing**.

