

History of MacDill Field and MacDill Air Force Base

By its auspicious geography and proximity to a supportive modern city with military roots, in the late 1930s, the U.S. Army Air Corps desired its newest and most modern facility, Southeast Air Base, to rise just south of Tampa, Florida. Selected in 1939, its location near the southeastern tip of the Continental U.S. was geopolitically ideal to link regional air installations at the nation's corners and beyond. It was a utilitarian decision as well, as the mostly vacant land was surrounded on three sides by the waters of Tampa Bay, in an area with year-round flying weather, excellent transportation connections and a ready supply of housing in nearby Tampa. As thousands of men of the Works Progress Administration began their two-year battle with rattlesnakes, mosquitos, and muck to level and prepare the land for an airfield, Southeast Air Base soon became MacDill Field in honor of the World War I aviator, aeronautical engineer and Airman Lieutenant Colonel Leslie MacDill, who lost his life fielding new aircraft. Dedicated on April 17, 1941, the base borne in the Great Depression was thrust by the Battle of Pearl Harbor to bypass adolescence and launch directly into World War II.

For the first year of that war, while buildings still rose across the base, bombers launched every day from its runways on combat sorties, their crews hunting for Nazi U-boats trolling the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean and Atlantic. As the European Theater of Operations heated up for the United States, thousands of Airmen on bombing missions began to lose their lives. MacDill Field, engineered to station the big bombers, answered the call for replacements. Over its first five years, the base's population mushroomed from a train car of men huddled over fires at an old quarantine station on the southern tip of the Interbay Peninsula to a city of thousands spanning more than 4,500 acres. To harness America's full fighting capacity, MacDill's population of American servicemen under the command of a Native American, Brigadier General Clarence Tinker, became more diverse, soon joined by Black troops and servicewomen, military and civilian, and even captured enemy prisoners of war.

Though defined by its achievements protecting America's shores and preparing bomber crews for battle in WWII, for the next 75 years, MacDill Air Force Base sustained its contribution to America's defense in myriad ways. It has seen many changes, surviving several closure attempts which resulted in dramatic changes to the base's mission. After the creation of an independent U.S. Air Force in 1947, the newly renamed MacDill Air Force Base continued the fight. MacDill AFB has deployed bomber crews to Europe, Africa, and Asia to deter the Soviet Union and punish Communist forces in North Korea. After reasserting its geopolitical value on the front lines of the Cuban Missile Crisis, MacDill launched its next life as a fighter base and home of its first combatant command, U.S. Strike Command. From 1963 to 1993, MacDill prepared fighter pilots for combat in conflicts from Vietnam in Southeast Asia to Iraq in Southwest Asia. As the fighters departed and the airfield grew silent for the first time in a half-century, crises, including the destruction of Homestead AFB in Hurricane Andrew and the peacekeeping action Operation Uphold Democracy in Haiti, validated once again MacDill AFB's strategic value as a platform to project America's military power. For the last quarter century and through today, MacDill AFB has served as an important link in America's Global Reach, providing aerial refueling capacity to

span the Southeast United States and the world. Joining that capacity with those of its major mission partners like U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, Reserve Associate 927th Air Refueling Wing and 31 other tenant organizations, MacDill AFB's daily impact spreads across dozens of the Department of Defense's most important mission sets that reach every corner of the globe.

Growth of Combatant Commands and Tenant Organizations at MacDill

In 1960, the Strategic Air Command declared its bomber base in its southern tier surplus, preferring instead new bases closer to its targets in the Soviet Union. However, despite a diminishing operational significance to national defense, at the same time, MacDill AFB's strategic significance grew exponentially. In September 1961 the Department of Defense established a novel joint command, U.S. Strike Command, and made MacDill the home for its headquarters in a single surplus dormitory. This unified command integrated personnel and assets from the Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps and Army into a fighting force capable of responding to global crises without resorting to nuclear weapons. It took the name U.S. Readiness Command shortly after the creation of its massive new headquarters compound in 1969 and spawned other headquarters up until the conclusion of its mission in 1987.

The growth of these major combatant command headquarters themselves spawned sub-headquarters at MacDill which began to shift the character of the base from an Air Force-centric installation to one serving all its joint and Coalition partners. The Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, the forerunner of today's U.S. Central Command, was activated at MacDill in 1980. Events such as the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan had threatened the stability of the Central Asia region and placed vital U.S. interests at risk. From 1981-1982, this task force evolved into a de facto regional unified command. As a result, it upgraded into a bona fide combatant command, U.S. Central Command, in 1983. Today it is the sole conduit for U.S. military interests in the Middle East, Southwest and Central Asia and the Horn of Africa.

Meanwhile, Congress had mandated the creation of this new command, composed of Special Forces from all services, after a disastrous Operation Rice Bowl rescue mission to repatriate American diplomats seized during the 1980 Iran Hostage Crisis. In 1987, U.S. Special Operations Command was formally established as a combatant command at MacDill. The same day it activated, USSOCOM took over the personnel and facilities left behind in the inactivation of the U.S. Readiness Command headquarters at MacDill.

Several other tenant organizations trace their lineage to these events. The Joint Communications Support Element continues to serve in the same capacity as its establishment under US Strike Command. The Special Operations Command-Central serves as the nexus of Special Operations forces in the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility. Likewise, the Marine Forces-Central serves as the U.S. Marine Corps element in that area of responsibility. Today a U.S. Army Reserve helicopter aviation support facility joins the larger population of tenant organizations, known collectively as "Team MacDill."

History of Total Force Integration at MacDill

Efforts to streamline the Department of Defense in the late 1990s eventually led to new arrangements at MacDill. By 2002, the Air Force had developed a policy to consolidate, when possible, Regular military, Reserve and Guard forces at bases within U.S. borders. This new mode of operations, dubbed “Total Force Integration,” paired different wings with similar missions—for example, a Regular Air Force fighter wing with an Air Force Reserve one—to utilize their resources more efficiently.

In 2005, plans were developed for just such a partnership at MacDill after the Department of Defense recommended a major realignment. According to the plan, the Air Force Reserve Command’s 927th Air Refueling Wing would relocate to MacDill but leave behind its eight KC-135 Stratotanker aircraft for redistribution at Selfridge Air National Guard Base, Michigan. Along with this, the 319th ARW at Grand Forks Air Force Base would realign and send its four KC-135s to MacDill. Meanwhile, at MacDill, the 6th Air Refueling Wing would integrate the four new aircraft and the 927th ARW into what the Air Force defined as an “active-Reserve” association. Within this new setup, the two wings at MacDill would retain their separate identities but work together and pool resources. With a combined total of 16 aircraft, both wings’ pilots would fly the same KC-135s, although for their respective wings’ tasked missions. In 2007, the four new aircraft arrived and began operations with the 91st Air Refueling Squadron. In 2008, MacDill welcomed the 927th ARW. In 2017, the number of aircraft expanded from 16 to 24 with the creation of a second regular Air Force squadron, the 50th Air Refueling Squadron, which in turn increased the aircraft available for the 927th ARW’s taskings.

In 2010, the 6th ARW added another squadron. This time, under a regular Air Force association with the Air National Guard, the 99th ARS joined MacDill’s chain of command for administrative purposes. However, it remained at its home base, the Birmingham International Airport, where it flies missions with the Alabama Air National Guard’s 117th ARW.

Colonel Leslie MacDill

An Army aviation pioneer and WWI veteran, Colonel Leslie MacDill, perished in a November 1938 plane crash-testing a new Air Corps training aircraft in Washington, D.C. Throughout his military aviation career, Colonel MacDill had become a member of the War Department’s General Staff in Washington. Colonel MacDill had grown up in America’s military air service and was poised to become one of its most important leaders. He attended one of the first military flight schools in San Diego, served overseas in the Philippines with the U.S. Army Signal Corps, and commanded an aerial gunnery training school in France during WWI. A brilliant man and pioneer, while aviation was still in its infancy, he received a Doctor of Science degree in Aeronautical Engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1922. He also served as a technical adviser on the Morrow Board in 1925, which advocated the establishment of the Air Corps in the Army—a milestone in the development of an independent Air Force. By the time of the tragic

mishap that claimed his life, MacDill had become a popular figure and a rising star in the Army Air Corps.

MacDill Major Aircraft Assignments	HHQ	Years Active
B-18 “Bolo”	GHQAF	1941
B-17 “Flying Fortress”	Third Air Force	1941-1945
B-26 “Marauder”	Third Air Force	1942-1943
B-29 “Stratofortress”	SAC	1945-1953
B-47 “Stratojet”	SAC	1951-1963
KC-97 “Stratofreighter”	TAC	1951-1963
F-84 “Thunderstreak”	TAC	1962-1964
F-4 “Phantom II”	TAC	1964-1979
F-16 “Fighting Falcon”	ACC	1979-1993
KC-135 “Stratotanker”	AMC	1996-Present

MacDill Major Operational Unit Assignments, Post-WWII

307th Bombardment Wing	SAC	1946-1954
306th Bombardment Wing	SAC	1950-1963
305th Bombardment Wing	SAC	1951-1959
12th Tactical Fighter Wing	TAC	1962-1965
15th Tactical Fighter Wing	TAC	1962-1970
1st Tactical Fighter Wing	TAC	1970-1975
56th Tactical Fighter Wing	TAC	1975-1981
56th Tactical Training Wing	TAC	1981-1991
56th Fighter Wing	ACC	1991-1993
6th Air Base Wing	ACC	1994-1996
6th Air Refueling Wing	AMC	1996-2001
6th Air Mobility Wing	AMC	2001-2017
6th Air Refueling Wing	AMC	2017-Present

MacDill Higher Headquarters Assignments

General Headquarters Air Force	1940-1942
Third Air Force	1942-1945
Continental Air Forces	1945-1946
Strategic Air Command	1946-1962
Tactical Air Command	1962-1991
Air Combat Command	1991-1996
Air Mobility Command	1996-Present