

Men and women in the Air Guard at Clovis home

1948, the 144th Fighter Interceptor Wing has been protecting California's skies and has been on constant alert for almost that entire period. Its mission is to intercept unknown aircraft entering sovereign airspace. Two of the unit's F-16A Fighting Falcons, modified for a strict air-to-air role, are always armed and ready to be in the air in just over 5 minutes. It takes a lot of men and women to keep these state-of-the-art airplanes flying. Many of them are your friends and neighbors. Welcome to Clovis home. — Editor

Wright Jr.

Senior Editor

It is "Clovis' own" 144th Fighter Interceptor Wing. It could be greedy, but there is no denying that it plays a major role in the unit.

The 144th employs a total of 1,100 people at its base at Fresno Air Terminal. Of those, 142 airmen and 21 officers, including Wing Commander General Allen W. Boone, call Clovis home. Others, such as Lt. Col. Jim Arthur, the wing's executive officer, are nearly natives. Arthur has been with the wing for years and has lived in three different houses in

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Major Fred Beltz uses model F-16s to explain maneuvers used by the pilots in air-to-air combat.

Ann Laiewski/The Clovis Independent

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Clovis during that time.

"We have a very good relationship with Clovis," he said. "We participate in parades and the like, and we'll have a color guard there for the Sept. 7 opening of school."

In turn, Clovis provides the unit with some of its very best people, Arthur said.

Because of its unique status as a California Air National Guard unit with about one-third of its members working full time, Arthur said many of its members have planted roots and have become active in churches, Little League and the like.

"These people are involved in the community because they're part of it; they're not just passing through," he said.

The Clovis Independent recently visited the air guard base to talk to some of its Clovis members.

Joe Billalba

Tech. Sgt. Joe Billalba is crew chief of F-16 No. 614. He's also a farmer, a member of the Clovis Rodeo Association and a true Clovisite.

Billalba graduated from Clovis High School in 1958 and it was with a chuckle that he noted daughters Jennifer and Amy both graduated from rival Clovis West.

Jennifer, 21, and Amy, 18, are both pre-med students at Fresno State University.

As crew chief, Billalba is mother hen to No. 614. He inspects the sleek aircraft before and after flights and is responsible for all maintenance. He may do some repairs himself or send parts out to specialists.

Billalba spent four years in the regular Air Force.

He has a real affinity for No. 614 and when posing for a photograph made sure the photographer knew that "this is not my airplane. My bird's in the air."

When he's not wearing his uniform, Billalba and his wife, Margaret, dry farm 80 acres of oat hay east of Clovis.

Besides being on the board of directors of the Rodeo Association, the avid outdoorsman is active in Clovis Boys League and the Clovis Masonic Lodge.

Fred Beltz

Maj. Fred Beltz and his physical therapist wife, Leslie, adopted Clovis. When the couple made the decision to

leave the nomadic life of the regular Air Force and plant roots, there was really no other city in the running. They remembered Clovis from their college days.

"When we were attending Fresno State, we realized that Clovis was a way of life," he said. "The Clovis Unified School District is one of the things that brought us back. We love Clovis."

The couple have supplied CUSD with four students, Allison, 13, at Alta Sierra; and Brian, 11, Justin, 9, and Meghann, 6, all at Garfield.

Beltz is the assistant operations officer of the 194th Fighter Squadron, a unit of the 144th. He has 1,800 hours at the controls of the F-16 and another 1,000 hours in its predecessor, the F-4 Phantom II. He also is an instructor pilot in the F-16.

To say he loves his job would be inadequate to express the enthusiasm he exhibits on the base.

"We do need to protect our coast. This is a very important job," he said. "Our pilots, across the board, are more seasoned than those in many regular Air Force units."

Beltz said the movie "Top Gun" is a very good demonstration of the air combat maneuvering — "We call it getting in the phone booth" — that the 144th's pilots practice. The movie featured the ACM training of Navy pilots with call signs like "Maverick" and "Iceman," but Beltz let it out that his call sign is "Fredley."

One of the jobs Beltz said he likes most is that of aircraft commander of one of the unit's two C-26s, a small airliner. In case of a state emergency such as earthquake or other disaster, Beltz supports the state military department and at times flies Gov. Wilson to the scene. When the governor is aboard, Beltz's craft becomes "California One." He takes great pride in that.

Don DeWoody

Master Sgt. Don DeWoody and his wife, Chris, moved the DeWoody clan to Clovis in 1983.

"We'd always wanted to move to Clovis," he said, but something had always come up.

His "fond" memories of Clovis may have started when he was a tight end/safety on a very powerful Hoover High School football team in 1969 that got its clock cleaned by Clovis High.

"They whacked us pretty good," he said. "We had some classic games with Clovis."

DeWoody also is a big fan of the school district with five children getting a CUSD education. Heather, 19, now attends FSU; Kasie, 16, is a Clovis High senior; Jared, 15, is a CHS freshman; Spencer, 12, is just starting out at Clark Intermediate School; and Stephanie, 10, attends Gettysburg.

DeWoody is a Scoutmaster with Clovis' Troop 7 and has been involved in Little League and soccer.

His military job is as the base's ground safety manager. As such he is responsible for seeing that the base complies with OSHA and Department of Labor standards as well as a myriad of Air Force and other regulations.

Besides regular inspections he is involved in the planning of new facilities, to see that they comply with vast and complicated regulations.

Connie GoForth

Senior Master Sgt. Connie GoForth is up to her ears in computer printouts. She is responsible for the base's \$30 million budget and the fiscal year expires Sept. 30. Arthur called her one of the most valuable people on the base.

GoForth and her husband, Jack, also picked Clovis as their home, moving here 22 years ago.

When asked if she liked the Clovis way of life, she laughed, "After 22 years, I think so."

Her children attended Dry Creek Elementary, Clark Intermediate and Clovis High schools.

"I don't think we could have picked a better place. The school system was so strong. The kids developed good values and good friendships. The kids always come home (to visit Clovis). That's a good sign."

GoForth's children are Kristine Locker, 24; Kim, 22; and Jack III, 20.

When the GoForth children were in school, she said she participated in all the regular "mom duties," indian guides, room mother, teacher's aide and baseball mom.

She said she occasionally attends meetings now of the Clovis City Council or Clovis Chamber of Commerce to keep up what's going on, but right now she's up to her ears in computer printouts and Sept. 30 is bearing down.



Tech Sgt. Joe Billalba
F-16 crew chief
Graduated CHS 1958



Master Sgt. Don DeWoody
Ground safety manager
Hoover High graduate
Moved to Clovis in 1983



Senior Master Sgt.
Connie GoForth
Budget director
Raised in Merced
Moved to Clovis 22 years ago