

Reader Comments (updated Sept. 6, 2007)

That change was part of Gen. McPeak's random monthly changes to long-standing Air Force tradition. Remember the radically odd uniform changes? He decided one day that each wing would have a unique number, and the 1st Fighter Wing won that contest. 1st SOW had to change.

*John Kemp
Navarre, FL*

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In answer to your question, AFSOC changed the designation in 1993 at the direction of the then Air Force Chief of Staff, General Merrill A. "Call me Tony" McPeak, perhaps the manliest manly man (parochial fighter pilot) to ever head the service. In a move largely perceived in the rank and file to degrade the considerable lineage and pride of Air Force special operators, and at a time that the service was benefiting from the best integration between SOF and tactical air forces in history following Operations Desert Shield & Desert Storm, General McPeak ruled that each number designating any flavor air wing must be unique.

Thus, he decided that either the 1st Tactical Fighter Wing at Langley AFB or the 1st Special Operations Wing at Hurlburt Field had to go. It was not a tough call for a fighter pilot.

The 1st SOW, due to the nature of special operations, had been involved in constant real-world operations since its inception as the 1st Air Commando Group in the CBI Theater in WWII. The battle streamers and awards were unprecedented in any wing, and was the envy of such units as the 1st TFW, which had spent most of its existence during the Cold War in garrison, "flying around the flag pole." They were still licking their wounds after Desert Storm, where they were placed in the choice position for counter-air operations at Dhahran, but were greatly out-performed and out-shined by the 33d TFW, which was relegated to a remote base in western Saudi Arabia, but accounted for most of the air victories (kills) of the war.

So the choice was made: the 1st SOW would be disbanded in favor of the 1st TFW, under its new designation as the 1st Fighter Wing. The rationale: 1st TFW traced its lineage to the "Hat in the Ring" group in WWI, beating the creation of the 1st ACGp by over two decades. Now, the Chief Historian in Charge needed to find a suitable replacement number for the special operators, especially fitting their unworthy, unmanly status. The 2d or 3d SOW might be appropriate, as the US Air Forces in WWII did expand the 1st Air Commando Group into the 2d Air Commando Group and the 3d Air Commando Group by the end of the war, and each saw considerable action behind Japanese lines in CBI. Nope, too appropriate.

So, General "Skeletor" came up with the ultimate insult: the wing would take the designation of the 16th Pursuit Group of World War II, which had the responsibility of protecting the Panama Canal from air attack in WWII and had the dubious distinction of never firing a shot in anger in its short and combat-free history. The decision was not received well at AFSOC, but under his authority to organize the Air Force as he saw fit (or according to his whims), AFSOC saluted smartly and retired the 1st SOW guidon for over 13 years.

The rebirth of the 1st SOW last year was greatly celebrated by everyone that has had anything to do with Air Force special operations since WWII. By allowing it, the re-designation demonstrates the exemplary character and leadership of our current USAF Chief of Staff, General T. Michael Moseley, who did not allow his fighter pilot heritage to cloud his judgment for the benefit of the whole Air Force.

*Lt. Col. Randy Durham, USAF (Ret)
Niceville, FL*

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Way to go Randy. Eloquently said as always.

*Lt. Col. Jim Godfrey, USAF (Ret.)
Colorado Springs, CO
Sept. 6, 2007*

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I suggest you ask then-CSAF McPeak. The change was driven at HQ USAF rather than MAJCOM and more than one "heritage-rich" unit disappeared during that time.

Lt. Col. Tom Gaj, USAF (Ret)

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Although I was not directly involved in the redesignation of the 1st Special Operations Wing to the 16th SOW in 1993, I can inform you it was done at the direction of Gen. Merrill McPeak, CSAF. During the post-Cold War inactivation of many squadrons and wings, he wanted each surviving unit to have a unique numerical designation, with priority based on a heritage scoring system based on their lineage, honors, and historical achievements. When it came to which wing would have the designation of "First," the 1st Fighter Wing at Langley was the winner (much to the consternation of the special ops community).

*Lawrence R. Benson
(a retired AF historian)*

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Check with General McPeak. He changed the 1st SOW to the 16th SOW. There was to be only one 1st Wing and that was going to be the 1st Fighter Wing at Langley.

Ed Bullard

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I don't know what official records will say but AFSOC did not change the name willingly. The CSAF General McPeak decreed there could only be one 1st Wing in the AF and the 1st FW at Langley because of "richer heritage" would BE the 1st Wing. AFSOC was given the 16th designator for the wing at Hurlburt Field. Someone else likely took the fall for the decision but there was no question at the time who made the decision.

Col. Gene Ronsick, USAF (Ret.)

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The then Chief of Staff, Gen. McPeak, in addition to redesigning the service dress uniform, decided that there would be no duplicate wing numbers, and the 1st TFW at Langley got to keep their number one.

Ed Mann