

# The Legacy of Altus Air Force Base



*INSPIRED – PROFICIENT – ADAPTIVE*



Born out of the cotton fields of southwestern Oklahoma, Altus Air Force Base first became home to military aircraft and personnel in 1943. With an average of over 300 days of weather favorable to flying each year, a generally flat landscape and few obstructions, the base was then and is still, ideally situated to be a perfect location for young airmen to hone their skills. Originally called Altus Army Airfield, construction of the new base began in May 1942. Over the next seven decades, the base has evolved to become the premier air mobility training location in the United States Air Force.

## 1940s

Altus Army Airfield became operational on 1 January 1943, training new pilots on multi-engine aircraft like the AT-9 *Jeep* and AT-17 *Bobcat*. After students perfected their skills with these aircraft, they transferred to units that would prepare them to fly the actual type of aircraft they would use in combat over Europe and in the Pacific theaters during World War II.





On 15 May 1945, Altus Army Airfield was placed on temporary inactive status. The air field became a storage and smelting facility for hundreds of surplus World War II aircraft. Among them was the *Memphis Belle*. After completing 25 missions in Europe and a War Bonds tour in the U.S., the B-17 *Flying Fortress* was flown to Altus where she was nearly destroyed. The *Belle* was subsequently saved and restored.

## 1950s

On 1 August 1953, Altus Air Force Base reactivated as a training base for transport aircraft. The feisty C-45 *Expeditor* and durable C-47 *Skytrain* were the main aircraft assigned to the base, run briefly by the 63rd Troop Carrier Wing under the watch of Tactical Air Command. During World War II, these aircraft were used for navigation, bombing, and gunnery training. They also conducted transport, aerial support, and mapping missions. After the war, the Air Force repurposed these aircraft for administrative and light cargo duties.

In the fall of 1953, the 96th Bombardment Wing, three bombardment squadrons, and one air refueling squadron were activated at Altus AFB, under Strategic Air Command. These squadrons eventually flew the first all jet-engine bomber, the B-47 *Stratojet* and the KC-97 *Stratofreighter*, a dual-purpose cargo and air refueling aircraft.





By the end of the decade both of these aircraft would be replaced by the KC-135A *Stratotanker* and the B-52 *Stratofortress*. The KC-135 was the first all-jet engine air refueling aircraft. This dynamic duo, equally matched in power and sustainability, expanded the boundaries of aerial refueling and has patrolled the skies all over the world for more than 60 years.

## 1960s

The 577th Strategic Missile Squadron was formed on 1 June 1961 to operate 12 Atlas F missile sites within a 40-mile radius of Altus Air Force Base, in response to the Soviet nuclear crisis. On 10 October 1962, the Atlas intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) became operational at Altus. By April 1965, the missile program was phased out.



In 1969, the 443d Military Airlift Wing and the 57th Airlift Squadron, moved to Altus, moving jurisdiction over Altus AFB to Military Airlift Command and making Altus the formal training base for the C-5s and C-141s. The 443d MAW trained crews at Altus until 1992.



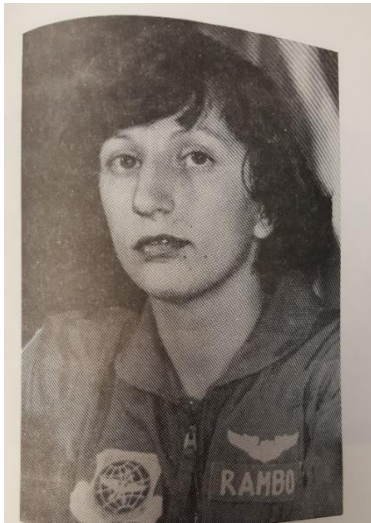
### **1970s**

During the 1970s, Altus Air Force Base saw many “firsts.” Nearly anything the C-5 or C-141 did became a record, whether it was the fastest time for their type of aircraft, the most weight carried, or graduating the first female C-141 pilots.

On 1 May 1974, the first aerial refueling between a KC-135 and a C-5 took place at 26,000 feet over Amarillo, Texas and Albuquerque, New Mexico. The KC-135 was assigned to the 11th Air Refueling Squadron and the C-5 was assigned to the 56th Airlift Squadron at Altus AFB.



On 2 September 1977, the first ten female pilots of the U.S. Air Force earned their silver wings. Two of those women, Kathleen Rambo and Kathy La Sauce, would go on to become the first female C-141 *Starlifter* student pilots at Altus Air Force Base.



## 1980s

The space shuttle *Discovery* transited through Altus Air Force Base in 1981 on a ferry flight from California to Florida. Altus AFB would be host to several space shuttles over the next two decades as they ferried across the country after completing their mission.



On 1 October 1984, the 340<sup>th</sup> Air Refueling Wing activated at Altus AFB to man the KC-135s under Strategic Air Command; they were soon retrofitted with the larger more powerful CFM-56 engines, and were designated "R" models.

On 21 January 1987 the Honorable Edward C. Aldridge presided over the ribbon cutting ceremony for the Airlift Training Center, Building 87. In his speech, Secretary Aldridge announced that C-17 aircrews would train in this building in the future.

In December 1989, the 56th Airlift Squadron sent C-5s to support Operation JUST CAUSE. The goal of the operation was to restore the democratic government in Panama. At the time, the operation was the largest and most complex combat operation since the Vietnam War.

## 1990s

The early 1990s continued to see the C-5, C-141, and KC-135 dominate the skies over Southwest Oklahoma, providing quality training to produce the finest air combat-ready aircrew members in the Air Force.



From August 1990 to June 1991, C-5 and C-141 units from Altus AFB flew mission to support Operations DESERT SHIELD and STORM.



On 1 October 1992, Air Mobility Command inactivated the 443rd Airlift Wing and activated the 97th Air Mobility Wing as the host unit at Altus. Then on 1 July 1993, Air Mobility Command transferred control of the base to Air Education and Training Command.



On 20 January 1994, the 97th Training Squadron was activated at Altus Air Force Base. This was the first move in the overall transfer of KC-135 training from Castle Air Force Base, California to Altus. In November, the 55th Air Refueling Squadron assumed responsibility for training KC-135 aircrews.

Nicknamed the “hot rod of heavies,” with a unique winglet, and expansive cargo area, powerful engines, the newest cargo aircraft, the C-17 *Globemaster III* arrived at Altus AFB on 26 March 1996.



The 54th Air Refueling Squadron was activated at Altus AFB in January 1998, becoming the sole KC-135R flying training squadron in Air Education and Training Command.

C-141s from the 57th Airlift Squadron participated in operation BIG DROP, which was the second largest airborne operation since World War II.



## 2000s

Shortly after the world celebrated the birth of a new century, the U.S. was plunged into its longest war ever after it was attacked on September 11, 2001. The Mighty 97th transported medical crews on a C-17 from the 58th Airlift Squadron and provided fighter aircraft support after the terrorist attacks. The C-17 was one of only a few aircraft allowed to fly over the nation due to the nature of the attacks.

General John P. Jumper, Air Force Chief of Staff, authorized one aircraft from each Air Force Wing to display the "Let's Roll" nose art, centered on the final words of Todd Beamer, passenger on Flight 93 on September 11, 2001. On March 25, 2002 the wing debuted the nose art on its first C-17, the *City of Altus*.

Lt Gen (retired) Michelle D. Johnson served in various roles throughout her Air Force career. She made history at Altus AFB in 2000 by being the first female commander of an Air Force operational group. She was largely responsible for reactivating the 97th Training Squadron at Altus AFB in 2002.

Beginning in 2005, the wing supported multiple operational and humanitarian missions worldwide and deployed an average of 300 personnel a year with 140 deployed at any one time. Today, Altus AFB continues to provide support for global contingencies and humanitarian emergencies as needed.

On June 29 2007, the wing held a flyaway for the C-5 Galaxy, ending a



prestigious 38-year stint at Altus Air Force Base. Since the stand-up of the schoolhouse in 1969, and the arrival of the first Galaxy in December 1969, every aircrew member trained on the Mighty C-5 passed through the 56th Airlift Squadron and the Southwestern skies of Oklahoma.

## 2010s

Altus Air Force Base continued to perform the basic mission it started in 1943, providing a safe, comfortable location to train military personnel on the intricacies of operating multi-engine aircraft.



Training international students at Altus Air Force Base helped improve joint nation missions with uniformed knowledge and operations.

The newest Air Force aircraft, the KC-46 *Pegasus*, arrived at Altus Air Force Base on 8 February 2019, creating a new future for air refueling missions.

In a first for Air Education and Training Command and the 56th Air Refueling Squadron, two KC-46 *Pegasus* aircraft from the 97th Air Mobility Wing, along with ten F-16 *Fighting Falcons* from the 49th Wing at Holloman AFB, New Mexico, teamed up in the skies over New Mexico to train and practice air refueling operations.

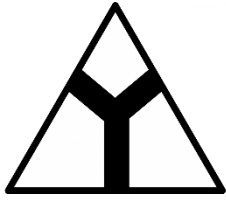


## 97 Air Mobility Wing Heritage



On January 28, 1942, the U.S. Army Air Force established the 97th Bombardment Group. Its original mission: conduct antisubmarine patrols using the largest bomber aircraft of the time, the B-17 Flying Fortress. As time passed, the unit became one of the few heavy bombing groups to bomb Nazi territory during World War II. Today, the 97th Bombardment Group is known as the 97th Air Mobility Wing and honors its heritage by displaying the symbolic “Triangle Y” upon three aircraft assigned to Altus Air Force Base.





During World War II, the Triangle Y was the tail marking of the 97<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group, the 97 AMW's predecessor. The United States Army Air Force (USAAF) was inspired by the Royal Air Force (RAF) who used them as call signs in radio procedures in the United Kingdom. The tail markings provided a visual means of unit and squadron identification in conjunction with the radio calls. As the skies over Europe became filled with thousands of bomber aircraft and fighter escorts, tail markings became necessary for the USAAF because it allowed for the rapid identification of a Group's aircraft in the air.

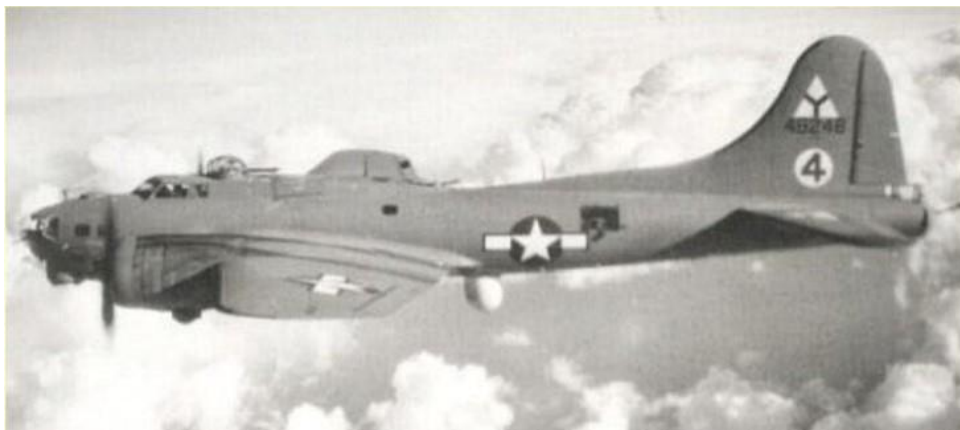
Therefore, to facilitate control among the bomber groups, the USAAF devised a system of aircraft tail markings in the summer of 1943 to identify each Group's aircraft. The system consisted of geometric shapes, letters, and numbers, or a combination of the three. For example, the 8th Air Force, 1st Bomb Wing chose the combination of a triangle and a letter to identify their aircraft. By summer 1943, however, the 97<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group had been reassigned from the 8th Air Force in England to the 12th Air Force in North Africa, which had adopted geometric tail markings to identify each of their Bomb Groups. The 97<sup>th</sup> was given the outline of a triangle as their tail marking. Why the triangle?

The 97<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group was given the triangle to honor their first assignment with the 8th Air Force, 1<sup>st</sup> Bomb Wing. The 97<sup>th</sup> flew with the triangle on the tail of its bombers until they were reassigned to the 15<sup>th</sup> Air Force, 5<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing in the Mediterranean in November 1943.

When the 97<sup>th</sup> reached Italy, the tail markings were revised, and all of the 5<sup>th</sup> Bomb Wing's Bomb Squadrons were identified with the letter Y. Why the Y?

The 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force had used everything from A to S and the B-24 Bomb Groups had used T, X, and Z, so out of the four letters of the alphabet not used by other wings, Y was chosen. The Y was then superimposed on a white triangle so that it would be visible against the olive drab camouflage paint of the aircraft. The Triangle Y was flown on the tails of the 97<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group's B-17s for the remainder of the War, becoming a symbol of unity and strength.

Just as the triangle was used to honor the 97<sup>th</sup> Bomb Group's heritage, the 97<sup>th</sup> Air Mobility Wing uses the Triangle Y to honor its World War II heritage today.





History Office  
97 Air Mobility Wing  
Altus AFB, OK  
580-481-5975