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After initial sadness at F-15 loss, Sioux City adjusts to less glamorous but essential tankers

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SIOUX CITY, Iowa — Two fighter jets scream by overhead, then loop around and land at Sioux Gateway Airport.

As the pair of F-15s roll past on the runway, Lt. Col. Tyson Herbold and his crew run through a series of preflight checks prior to firing up the engines on one of the 185th Air Refueling Wing's KC-135 tanker jets.

Arriving for a paint job at the 185th's paint shop Tuesday, the F-15s were a high-speed blast from the past, a reminder of the days when F-16 fighter jets based at the 185th flew over Sioux City almost daily.

Just off that same runway, the Sioux City Journal reports (<http://bit.ly/1ILrMYR>) Herbold sat in the cockpit of the base's present — and future. With ongoing American military operations worldwide, the 185th will be in demand to carry fuel to aircraft around the globe.

Those big, bulky tankers resting at the 185th may not be as glamorous as the sleek fighting machines once housed here, but they represent something base personnel ultimately realized the fighters never could: security.

When Iowa National Guard leaders announced in September 2000 that the 185th would convert from fighters to tankers, it wasn't the

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most popular decision, especially among pilots who would go from flying at extreme speeds to cruising in the slow lane.

But looking back, said commander Col. Brian Miller, one of those affected fighter pilots, it's the best thing that could have happened.

"I took the announcement of going from fighters to heavies about as well as a 4-year-old when his candy is taken away," Miller said. "But had we not converted when we did, there is a chance we wouldn't even be open right now."

The announcement disappointed many on the base, but many others welcomed the tankers. The fighters may have been leaving, but at least their jobs weren't going with them, said Chief Master Sgt. David Miller, the current command chief who was equipment maintenance branch chief at the time.

"As long as the gates were going to stay open, we had the philosophy that we really didn't care what we worked on," he said. "Maintenance practices are still the same. Hydraulics are still hydraulics."

The conversion meant the loss of about 20 full-time jobs, many of which Miller said have since been regained, bringing the total number of full- and part-time employees at the base to 956.

Some pilots left to continue flying fighters at other bases. Some retired rather than go through the conversion. Those who remained were retrained to fly the KC-135. Mechanics were trained how to fix and maintain a different aircraft. More than \$40 million was spent on a new hangar and other modifications to accommodate the larger jets.

On Jan. 16, 2003, the 185th's fighters took off for the last time, headed to their new home in New York. That same day, the first tanker landed, marking the beginning of a new mission.

Guard members and civilians alike haven't looked back, despite a little uncertainty at the time.

Then-mayor Marty Dougherty said city officials had been given a heads up that the conversion was being considered.

"I think the question was whether the community would support the move or fight it," Dougherty said.

Dougherty, now the city's economic development director, said the main concern was that the base remain open.

"We supported what they wanted to do. It's an important employer for us. It's an important user of the airport," he said.

The conversion was the result of a numbers game. In 2000, military officials were anticipating a round of closures of military bases and installations. The Air Force and Air Guard were already closing fighter wings. With the 185th in Sioux City and the 132nd Fighter Wing in Des Moines providing similar missions, Iowa Guard officials doubted the state would be able to keep both, said retired Lt. Gen. Ron Dardis, who was the Iowa National Guard adjutant at that time.

"Here we sat with two with like missions. I could see that didn't bode well for Iowa," Dardis said.

Guard leaders set about creating a tanker unit and proposed the switch to both Iowa units. Neither wanted the tankers, Dardis said.

A Spencer, Iowa, native who joined the 185th in 1966 and flew fighter jets here for 30 years, Dardis encouraged 185th leaders to agree to the change.

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"I knew that it was the best thing for the unit, but it was difficult to convince Sioux City leadership," Dardis said. "My heart was with the 185th, and I knew the 185th would be flying a long, long time if they took the mission."

Since the change, the unit's done a lot of flying, more than leaders probably could have envisioned. During the conversion, the United States went to war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Ever since, military aircraft and the tankers that refuel them have been pressed into extended service.

That need continues, Col. Miller said, guaranteeing the 185th a steady job. Rarely are all eight of the unit's tankers home. At least one is almost always deployed. It means more missions and more travel opportunities for more people.

"We've been busy with that, busier than we would have been with fighters," he said. "Going from fighters to tankers has caused us to be more involved than we would have been."

Chief Master Sgt. Tim Ireland appreciates those new opportunities. Ireland loaded weapons on the F-16s. The conversion eliminated his job, so he applied to be a fuel boom operator. He now flies all over the world, running the equipment that refuels aircraft thousands of feet above ground.

"I really liked working on F-16s, but this job, for me, is a lot better situation, a lot more opportunities for me as a boom operator," Ireland said as he ran through his preflight checks before departing with Herbold on Tuesday's flight.

The 185th's switch to tankers has provided the longevity everyone touted at the time of the conversion. The 132nd in Des Moines is currently converting from fighter jets to flying unmanned aircraft, among other duties.

Had the fighters stayed in Sioux City, the 185th could be undergoing a similar transition now, or a closure. It's comforting for 185th members to know they're flying a mission that likely will remain in high demand, Miller said. As local Guard members have watched the military reallocate its resources in recent years, that conversion is looking better all the time.

"I think the unit members, now that we understand the importance, know there's as much pride in this mission as the previous mission," he said. "As we look back, it's turned out far better than any of us anticipated."

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