

A History of NASIC

NATIONAL AIR AND SPACE INTELLIGENCE CENTER

WRIGHT-PATTERSON AIR FORCE BASE, OHIO

99127—Engineering and Scientific Aide

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During the Cold War, the Air Force's Foreign Technology Division (FTD) reaped the benefits of the Universal Selective Service, better known as the draft. Although FTD did not actually receive draftees, it did obtain enlisted personnel who, believing 4 years in a bed was better than 2 in a hole, joined the Air Force. One particular group of enlisted men (sorry, no women at that time) to arrive at FTD's Pepto-Bismol pink building carried the specialty code 99127—Engineering and Scientific Aide. These airmen had degrees in engineering, mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Most had bachelor's degrees, but a few had obtained master's degrees before they felt Uncle Sam's hot breath down their necks.

In contrast to the military's much maligned history of assigning people haphazardly, these airmen actually ended up in positions where they could use their special talents to the fullest. Arriving at a time when FTD was expanding into the world-renowned organization it is today, most 99127 were assigned to the fledgling data collection and data integration branches. Along with the usual mundane jobs delegated to airman, such as KP, orderly room duty, and policing the grounds, the 99127 were thrown into the middle of Cold War functions. Whether it was analyzing radar signals, decoding intercepts, measuring spectral collections, or just wandering marshes looking for extraterrestrials, the 99127 found themselves involved at just about every level of the FTD mission.

The 1960's were also a transition time for FTD's engineering methods. Although mainframe computers were available, the vast majority of scientific and engineering calculations were still obtained using slide rules, trigonometric and logarithmic tables, and clanking Frieden mechanical calculators. Many of the 99127 had experience with computers in college and soon paved the way for bringing this modern tool into the mainstream of their new organization.

During this period, FTD was scattered throughout Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Its headquarters was in building 828, with other operations housed in building 262, the old base hospital, the Nordon bombsight building, and others. Although separate buildings created compartmentalization and thus eased security, it hindered the flow of ideas and innovation. Projects that required cooperation and feedback were difficult. The present environment of one building, secure phone lines, and data transmission via computer was still decades away. To alleviate the data flow problem, an unofficial network called the "airman mafia" emerged.

Although the educational background of the 99127 made them an entity unto themselves, FTD's unique enlisted housing quarters was instrumental in the creation of the working atmosphere of these airmen. For security reasons, single FTD enlisted personnel were housed in building 1430, a converted WWII-era complex for married noncommissioned officers. Rather than dormitory rooms, the building consisted of apartments. Each apartment contained two bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, and bath, and held two to four airmen, depending on their ranks. Although subject to the whims of Ohio's ever changing weather, the apartments were considered much better lodging than the modern airmen's quarters in Wood City.

Building 1430, now long gone, was located just west of gate 15A. Its distance from the main housing facility had another plus. Because the base chow-hall was too distant for lunchtime meals, FTD airman were authorized an extra \$1.00 a day. With the basic pay for an airman being less than \$100 a month, the extra lunch money was looked on as quite a blessing.

The airmen being housed in the same location meant faces were quickly attached to functions, and the varied components of the intelligence puzzle were no longer a mystery. This relationship resulted in a conduit of information that flowed between outlying 99127. Ideas and methods were shared and the airmen created an environment of cooperation that would not have been possible under normal military circumstances.

Because the airmen were young, single, and underpaid, the thought of putting in long hours on daunting projects was seen more as an academic exercise rather than toil. Well after the civilian and officer population had left for the day, the 99127, plus a few young officers, could be found inside 828 programming the mainframe computer, the IBM 9074. They wrote code, punched cards, and watched tape-drives spin and hundreds of lights flicker in hopes of perfecting methods not possible with a slip-stick. Eventually, much of their software found its way into routine technical analysis and the descendants of those codes are still functioning today.

The "mafia" was able to expedite the analysis of raw data, determine the reliability of collected information, and in general improve old methods and develop new procedures into uncharted areas. All of this was accomplished quietly and routinely by individuals wearing one to four stripes on their sleeve.

The tour of duty for a 99127 was 4 years. The Air Force did not have a reenlistment program for this category. Instead, when their tour was up, they turned in their blue suits for more varied garb. Many of the airman returned to FTD as civilians, while others became contractors, found jobs with sister agencies, or went into industry or academia. Whatever they did afterwards they left a legacy that remains to this day, and did so at a bargain basement price to American taxpayers.

