

DEFEND THE BASE
ACCEPT FOLLOW ON FORCES
TAKE THE FIGHT NORTH



In recent months, tensions have been running high in the Pacific theater. The US Air Force's 8th Fighter Wing, the famous 'Wolf Pack', stands at the forefront of operations in the region.

REPORT Stefan Goossens/4Aviation

THE IRON-CLAD ALLIANCE between the US and the Republic of Korea is evident in everything we do,' says Col David Shoemaker, the 8th Fighter Wing commander — a role that earns him the nickname 'the Wolf'. Shoemaker presides over one of the most important wings in the US Air Force, equipped with a pair of elite fighter squadrons flying Block 40 F-16CMs at Kunsan Air Base.

The 35th and 80th Fighter Squadrons of the 'Wolf Pack' regularly fly closer to the North Korean border than any other unit — fitting for a wing that was once led by the legendary Col Robin

Olds, who first coined the 'Wolf Pack' nickname for his aggressive, hungry, young F-4 aviators in Vietnam. From Thailand, the wing moved to Kunsan in September 1974.

Located about 120 miles south of Seoul, Kunsan was originally constructed by the Japanese in 1938 and was used on a limited basis by the US between 1945 and 1949 when American forces left South Korea. In July 1950, soon after the Korean War started, the base was occupied by North Korean forces. The US Army recaptured it on September 30, 1950, and from August 1951 the 3rd Bombardment Wing was the first air force unit assigned here.



Today, the 8th FW flies alongside the Republic of Korea Air Force (RoKAF) and its co-located 38th Fighter Group, operating KF-16C/D Block 52s with the 111th Fighter Squadron. 'We train with the 38th Fighter Group,' says Shoemaker. 'We enjoy friendships at a personal level while providing for the collective defense of the peninsula and the region. The saying 'Katchi Kapshida', 'we go together', is strong at every level. This is my third year-long assignment to Kunsan in the past 12 years, and the joint capability of the USAF/RoKAF has improved exponentially in that time. We've developed our ability to train and fight together through 'Red Flags' and our peninsula-wide exercises 'Max

Above: Exercise 'Vigilant Ace 17' saw F-35As from Hill AFB, Utah, forward-deploying to Kunsan from their six-month bathhole at Kadena, Japan. **USAF/TSgt Joshua Rosales**

Left: An 80th FS F-16CM taxis out at Kunsan. The 'WP' tailcode stands, of course, for 'Wolf Pack'. **Stefan Goossens**

Right: 'The Wolf' — Col David Shoemaker. **USAF**



'Thunder' and 'Vigilant Ace'. Our goal is the same — peace on the peninsula. We hone our craft and ensure our readiness to deter attack, but if called upon to defend our neighbors and allies, may God have mercy on the 'Wolf Pack's' prey.'

'Juvats' and 'Pantons'

The 80th Fighter Squadron 'Juvats' is commanded by Lt Col William 'Lewd' Lutmer. Like the wing itself, this squadron has a rich history, being formed in January 1942 and receiving P-39 Airacobras in Brisbane, Australia. It flew its first combat missions from Port Moresby, New Guinea, on July 22, 1942, and scored its initial aerial victories the following month. The 'Juvats' deployed



F-105 Thunderchiefs to Thailand twice for combat in 1964 and 1965 and flew 7,384 combat sorties in South-east Asia, with 2,657 of them over North Vietnam.

After an illustrious period flying the F-4C Phantom II, the 80th TFS became the first overseas USAF unit to convert to the F-16A, in September 1981. In 1987, it traded in its early 'Vipers' for Block 30 F-16C/Ds, before it received its current jets in early 2008.

The intriguing squadron nickname refers to the squadron's time spent in New Guinea. One of its earliest commanders, Capt Edward 'Porky' Cragg, decided to name the unit 'Headhunters', out of respect to the natives who rescued many downed P-38 pilots from the clutches of the Japanese forces. The unit badge remains a direct reference to the 'friends down in the jungle'. The official

squadron motto is 'Audentes Fortuna Juvat', commonly translated as, 'Fortune favours the bold'.

The 35th FS 'Pantons' is one of the oldest USAF squadrons, activated as the 35th Aero Squadron on June 12, 1917. With the threat from the north being ever-present and as real as a threat can get, the base is extremely active and always on a high state of readiness. This means lots of regular training missions and exercises for both squadrons, while there is no shortage of visiting Stateside-based units.

In 2017 alone, exercises came thick and fast. They included 'Max Thunder 2017', the second largest flying exercise on the Korean peninsula involving 80 aircraft; 'Beverly Pack 17', rehearsing the wartime mission in a controlled environment; 'Buddy Wing', working with the RoKAF;

and 'Vigilant ACE', the largest ever joint air exercise between South Korea and the US, involving 230 aircraft.

The week-long 'Buddy Wing' exercises are designed to improve understanding and techniques between the USAF and RoKAF, with squadrons deploying to fly alongside one another. This usually involves four to six USAF aircraft going on the road to RoKAF bases, or vice versa. The September 2017 'Buddy Wing', for example, saw the 80th FS visiting the 17th Fighter Wing at Cheongju and then a reciprocal deployment.

No end in sight

Reflecting on the current political situation in this strained region, Shoemaker says, 'Looking into the future, our focus remains unflinchingly on the mission. It doesn't get much

simpler for us here. We know the threat is to the north.

'In the future, we will remain ready to support combat operations if called upon. This means flying with our Korean partners and exercising to ensure [we] have the confidence that we can go to war as an effective fighting force at a moment's notice. It also means integrating with forces in the region, as we're seeing now with the incorporation of fifth-generation aircraft in 'Vigilant Ace 17'. We're conducting the same mission, but we're doing it in a much more focused manner.

Clockwise from far left: F-35As operated from Gwangju during 'Vigilant ACE 2017'. **Sang Ho Chang**

'Wolf Pack' F-16s operate from hardened aircraft shelters at Kunsan. This is a 'clean' 80th FS 'tub' (two-seat F-16D). **Stefan Goossens**

The standard gesture from a Juvats' pilot is a 'crush 'em' – obligatory for any taxing USAF pilot. **Stefan Goossens**

Below: The partnership with RoKAF squadrons is of great importance, and training alongside fighters such as this KF-16C is vital on a day-to-day basis. **Stefan Goossens**

Acknowledgements: The author wishes to thank Col David Shoemaker, Capt Chris Mesnard, 1st Lt Britanny Curry and Mi Chang for their assistance with this feature.

