



The 161st Air Refueling Wing is a world-premier tanker and mobility force for the State and Nation. Arizona's only air refueling unit is located at Goldwater Air National Guard Base; a 60-acre parcel on the south side of Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport. It owns and operates eight KC-135R Stratotanker aircraft.

Federal and State Missions

The 161st Air Refueling Wing's federal mission is to organize, train and equip units and individuals to meet worldwide requirements in support of the Air Force's Global Reach mission. It is a combat force multiplier for rapid mobilization, worldwide deployment, airlift, aeromedical evacuation and sustained aerial refueling operations for United States and partner nation air forces. The unit enables global engagement by maintaining all-weather warfighting capability in support of conventional and nuclear operations, special operations, contingency tasking, and homeland defense.

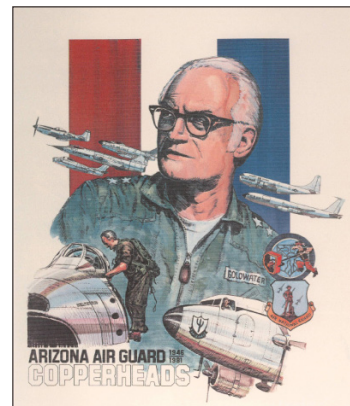
As a component of the Arizona National Guard, the wing has a state mission to provide protection of life, property and preserve peace, order and public safety. These missions are accomplished through emergency relief support during natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes and forest fires; search and rescue operations; support to civil defense authorities; maintenance of vital public services and counterdrug operations.



A 161st Air Refueling Wing KC-135R Stratotanker refuels F-16 Fighting Falcons over Arizona, April 8, 2015.

History

The unit was first established as the 197th Fighter Squadron on Dec. 12, 1946. Its members were, and are still, known as the "Copperheads." Their mission transitioned to air refueling in 1972 and the unit eventually grew to be the wing it is today. The 161st evolved into a powerhouse for mobility operations and a primary source of air refueling support in the Southwest. It is organized to transition smoothly between state and federal missions. The crews and equipment are seamlessly interchangeable with any active duty unit.



U.S. Senator Barry M. Goldwater was an original member of the unit and served in the Arizona Air National Guard from 1946 to 1952.

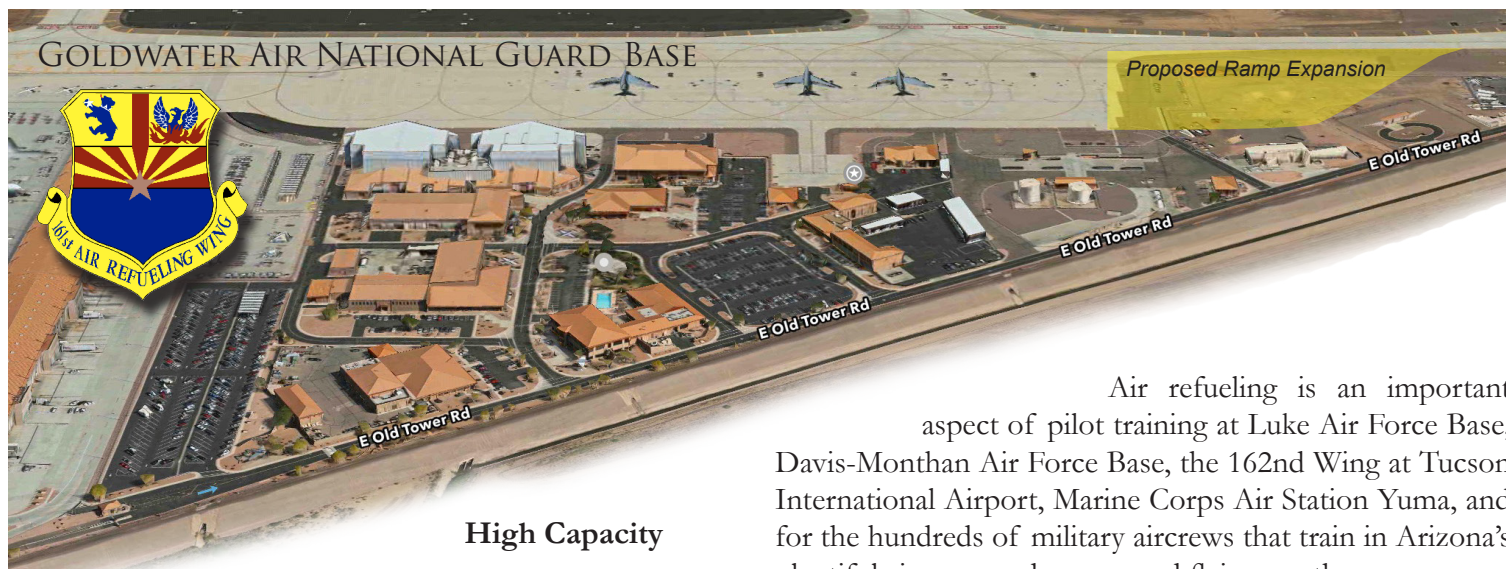
Capabilities

The KC-135 is the core air refueling platform for the United States Air Force and has excelled in this role for more than 70 years. The 161st operates the KC-135 "R" model, the latest version of the aircraft. Depending on the fuel storage configuration, the KC-135 can carry up to 200,000 pounds of JP-8 fuel, and 83,000 pounds of cargo, or personnel.

Between aeromedical evacuations, disaster relief efforts, and delivery of cargo and personnel, the 161st is one of the busiest tanker units in the Air Force and the Air National Guard. The wing deploys the tanker globally, landing and operating in both foreign and domestic soil in order to support multinational military and humanitarian missions, flying an average of 3,800 hours annually.

Vision for the 161st: Expand to Meet Demand

The 161st Air Refueling Wing's primary goal is to increase its fleet of permanently assigned KC-135s from eight aircraft to 12. Four additional tankers will help ensure the wing meets demand in the Southwest and continues in its role as a key mobility force for the next 70 years.



High Capacity

Today, Goldwater Air National Guard Base has capacity to host four additional KC-135s. To more easily house them in the future, the base is pursuing construction that will extend its existing ramp eastward. In the long term, the expanded ramp area would perfectly accommodate the beddown of any larger, next generation refueling aircraft.

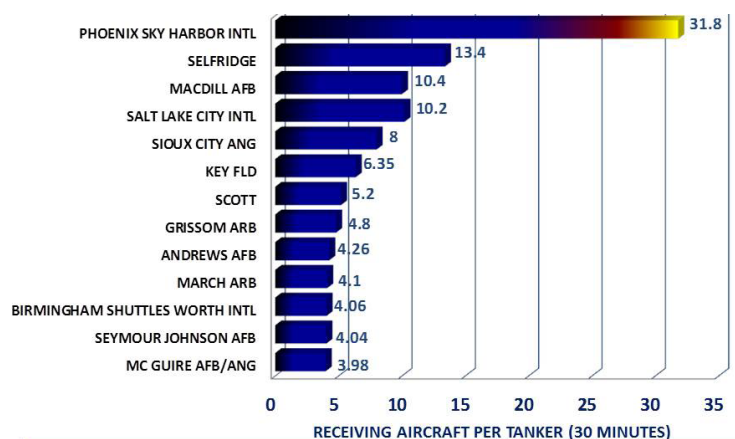
Phoenix & Arizona - Assets to National Defense

Location and expertise are the wing's key assets. The 161st is in a unique position to help the Air Force meet significant air refueling demand in the Southwest:

- Location is highly relevant for nuclear deterrence.
- Multiple runways at Sky Harbor assure the mission.
- Phoenix workforce represents a large recruiting pool.
- Wing members are recognized experts in all aspects of tanker operations.
- Community support in Arizona for the military is unsurpassed. Arizonans welcome new missions and work to sustain existing ones.

Air refueling is an important aspect of pilot training at Luke Air Force Base, Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, the 162nd Wing at Tucson International Airport, Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, and for the hundreds of military aircrews that train in Arizona's plentiful airspace and year-round flying weather.

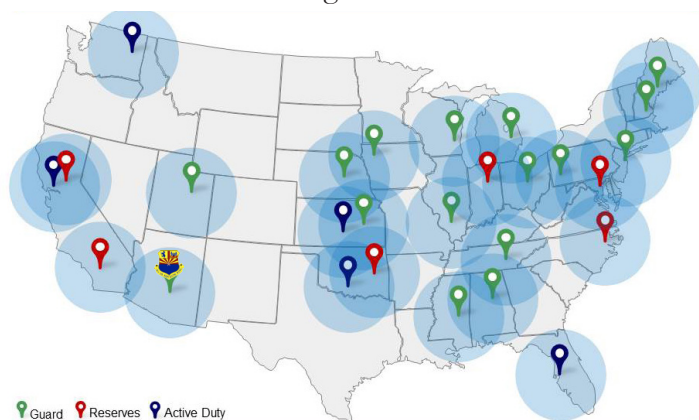
- For every KC-135 at the 161st, there are 31.8 potential receivers within a 30 minute flight radius; more than any other tanker base in the country.



High Impact

- Authorized Personnel: 846 Airmen
 - 315 Full-time Guardsmen
 - 531 Drill Status Guardsmen (Part time)
- In 2025, the wing...
 - Flew 3,283 hours
 - Flew 497 sorties
 - Delivered fuel to 1,619 receiver aircraft
 - Offloaded 6.67 million pounds of fuel
- The 161st...
 - Deploys an average of 150 Airmen annually
 - Deployed 3,794 Airmen since 9/11
 - Maintains manning levels consistently above 100%
 - Named an Air Force Outstanding Unit in 2016
 - Nationally-recognized Distinguished Mission Support Group in 2015
 - #1 ANG Security Forces Squadron for 2014 & 2024

(Current as of September 2026)



The 161st Air Refueling Wing in Arizona is one of very few tanker units in the west. This map shows the distribution of air refueling bases in the continental United States and depicts a 30 minute flying radius around each base.