

# Fairchild Air Force Base

by Blythe Thimsen  
photos courtesy of U.S. Air Force



**A**S STORIES OF MILITARY SKIRMISHES FROM AROUND THE WORLD COME FLOATING back to us on nightly news programs and in newspapers, it is easy to feel removed from all that is taking place to shape our world. Places like Afghanistan and Iraq play no role in our day to day life in

# Spokane's Pride In The Sky

A large, dark silhouette of a multi-engine aircraft is shown in flight, positioned horizontally across the middle of the frame. The aircraft is set against a sky that transitions from a deep blue at the top to a bright orange and yellow near the horizon. Below the horizon, a vast expanse of white and golden clouds is illuminated by the low sun, creating a dramatic and atmospheric scene.

Spokane and are easily set aside as something to reflect upon during the evening news and then to be forgotten until the next day's report. Yet, for a large group of our neighbors and fellow residents, the reality of such places is far greater than we could realize.





Front Gates Fairchild Air Force Base

**H** EAD OUT OF SPOKANE TO THE WEST on Highway 2 and you are met with empty fields, a ribbon of highway unfurling before you and wide open skies. Out here is one of Spokane’s greatest connections to the outside world; a place where locations like Afghanistan and Iraq are as familiar and well known as the gas station on the corner. This is Fairchild Air Force Base (FAFB), home of the Survival School (officially called Survival Evasion Resistance Evacuation – SERE) and the 92<sup>nd</sup> Air Refueling Wing.

For many people in Spokane, what lies beyond the gates of Fairchild is as mysterious to them as one of those far-off aforementioned countries. Large black gates guarded by military personnel in full gear can be foreboding for anyone who approaches; however, inside the gates is a full community with residents and employees who are an important part of our greater Spokane community.

A base chapel, hotel, BX, credit union, pharmacy, food court, dry cleaners, library, education center with tuition assistance, gas station, dorms, dining hall, travel agency, fitness center, auto center, post office, movie theatre, a place called Funspot, and a recreation center with organized intramural golf and softball: it sounds a bit like Club Med or an all-inclusive vacation getaway spot, but these are the things which dot the landscape inside the gates of FAFB, in a world that most people do not see. Additionally, there are 1,345 units of officer and enlisted housing made up of two, three or four bedroom houses arranged in small neighborhoods. “This base is like a town in and of itself,” says 2<sup>nd</sup> LT Tristan Hinderliter, Deputy Chief of Public Affairs for Fairchild.

For those who live on the base, it is more than simply an Air Force Base, it is a community that they call home. The base creates a sense of community for the service men and women who live and work there. There is an effort to make this place feel like a relaxing home rather than just a military workplace. To that end, an outdoor

recreation department is available from which residents and personnel may rent equipment like boats, skis, etc. and there are activities such as organized trips to places like Seattle.

“A lot of things you do, you can’t talk about,” says Major Travis Edwards, a pilot stationed at FAFB who is originally from Florida. “Most of the people on the base do it (live there) for the community.” In a world where much is classified and you are not always able to openly talk about your work, there is something reassuring about living in a community of people who are all in it with you and who understand the limitations you have in discussing your job. Even if things cannot be shared openly, there is still the feeling of camaraderie among people who live on the base.

“Family and friends can’t [always be told],” says Senior Airman Lindsay Moon, a boom operator. “You want to share with them.” Having that group of people with whom you work also serve as your personal community eases the burden.

Most enlisted service men and women are stationed in one place for three to five years, while officers average three years



KC-135s, like this one on the tarmac, can hold up to 83,000 pounds of cargo or 200,000 pounds of fuel.

spent in one location. This allows time for relationships to be built and a sense of community developed.

For Moon, who grew up in Spokane and graduated from Shadle Park High School in 1998, being stationed at Fairchild was a welcome assignment. Looking at the different bases where he could perform his job, and knowing the reputation of the base, Fairchild was where he hope to go to and he put it at the top of his “wish list.”

Edwards, who is from Florida, went to college before entering Intelligence Officer Training in Texas, then he was stationed in California for his pilot training. When he came to Fairchild, it was sight unseen. The experience has been good. “The thing I really like about Spokane is there are seasons,” says Edwards. “It seems like people appreciate the military. [There are] military discounts and people out in the community stop and tell you thank you.”

Over the past few years there have been instances where citizens have gathered at the gate of the base to protest and express their disagreement with military actions. Although it may be discouraging for some, Edwards recognizes it is all part of our freedom, the very thing for which he fights. “You see protests at the gate, and you applaud the fact that you are able to do that,” he says. “That’s why

we are here, so people can voice their feelings.”

While stationed in Spokane, many of the service men and women at the base are able to stretch their wings and see more of the country than they may have ever before. Some of Edwards’ favorite places he has been include Hawaii (what he calls “one of the nicer places!”), as well as Mildenhall, England. “You see the sights, take pictures, eat the food and experience a different culture,” he says. “It is definitely a lot of work, though. As a team, so much goes into what we do. People are dedicated. It is a lot of unsung heroes.”

Those heroes get to shine a bit in July during the base’s annual open house, known as Skyfest. This free event is open to the public and usually draws over 100,000 visitors for the opportunity to get an up close view of Air Force aircraft, see base amenities, meet personnel and watch acts such as the Thunderbirds, who performed their aeronautical stunts this last July to an awe-filled crowd.

“Employees and large numbers of civilians are out here,” says Moon of the annual open house which is an incredible opportunity to get a first hand look at the base. “That’s our opportunity to show the public what the Air Force is all about. We can get



This is the view a boom operator has during a during a mid-flight refueling mission.





Service men and women from Fairchild AFB are deployed throughout the world in order to defend our freedom.

the next generation coming into the Air Force. Most people don't get the opportunity to get onto base; folks get to see what we have to offer."

What the Air Force, and Fairchild specifically, has to offer is an opportunity to serve your country and community right here in the beautiful Northwest. "For me, being an airman is a great privilege," says Edwards. "The opportunity to serve and give something back is a wonderful opportunity."

"It is a big honor," says Moon. "People for generations have served. My great grandfather served in WWII. It is an honor to serve."

In addition to the honor of serving the country and being a part of Fairchild's tight-knit community, being stationed at Fairchild offers the opportunity to work within two well know and respected areas: the Survival School (SERE) and the 92<sup>nd</sup> Air Refueling Wing.

When Technical Sergeant RC DeLano, an SERE specialist, was in basic training in 1986, he was selected to interview for survival school. "Who would like to go work outdoors and eat bugs?" asked my survival instructor," says DeLano. "I raised my hand."

Don't let the description fool you; his job involves much more than snacking on bugs and reveling in the great outdoors.

"Instill confidence and give them skills to take care of themselves," he says of the most important part of his job. "Once they get into that aircraft, we want them to focus on that mission. On the way, it is always in their mind, 'what if I get stuck here?'" From any place or situation in which airmen could possibly find themselves, DeLano says the end goal is "To return with honor."



Base housing is set up in small neighborhoods that foster community.

DeLano is part of the team that is responsible for teaching service men and women to survive a number of dangerous situations. According to the SERE Fact Sheet from the Department of the Air Force, "Instructors assigned to the Survival School teach seven different courses to approximately 6,500 students annually. Five of the seven courses are taught at

Fairchild. The other two courses are conducted at Naval Air Station Pensacola, Florida and Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska."

Forty-nine combat survival classes are taught per year at Fairchild, with each class lasting 17 days. Classroom training focuses on the physical and psychological aspects of survival. After the in-class instruction, students head north toward the



Colville National Forest for hands-on experience. Students receive training and practice in survival skills for a variety of environments in which they might find themselves, including shelter construction, navigation, camouflage techniques, food procurement and preparation, and ground-to-air signals.

So, what is life like for a survival student? There are risks associated with the skills in which they train, says DeLano; however, safety is always number one focus. “The majority of the time we will have instructors with them, they are never by themselves,” says DeLano. “Everyone has radios.” In addition to radios, every student is equipped with a compass, a signal mirror – which Delano says is “the single most effective device” – a whistle, clothes, sleeping bag and rain protection.”

Don’t go looking for take-out Chinese, a frozen pizza, packed homemade PB&J or even a smuggled snack pack of Wheat Thins. These students are trained for the worst, which means they don’t take any food with them out into the field. The dinner menu is determined by the plants and bugs they can harvest and their creativity in putting it all together.

Although students may yearn for the completion of the



Training exercises like this are a common sight on base.

it since 1989. It is one of the toughest things I have ever done, but the most rewarding. If you could see the look on their face,” he says, referring to the sense of accomplishment and newfound confidence students have upon completing and graduating from the course.

“There are a lot of good folks out here,” says DeLano of the people who live and work at Fairchild. He is proud of his service and that of others at the base – both those who live on base and those who live off base. “Don’t be afraid to ask them questions. They are out there in the public, you just have to look for them.”

Membership has its privileges for those at Fairchild and in the Air Force. Entering the door of the flight building, it looks much like any airport, but on a smaller scale. A screening area leads back to a boarding gate from which family members, dependents and retired and current personnel are able to fly on planes heading out of

Fairchild for a reduced fee. This perk is accessible if a scheduled flight matches up with your destination, but there is always the risk of getting stranded should a flight schedule change or there not be enough room. Still it is a nice perk for those who dedicate their lives to serving others.

Just what waits out on the tarmac? Several types of planes call Fairchild AFB home, but none are as well known as the KC-135

Stratotanker refueling plane. Usually flying with three people – a pilot, co-pilot and boom operator – the planes use four engines with 20,000 pounds of thrust to lift off the ground and whisk through the air at roughly 30,000 feet.

When you are cruising down the highway and your low fuel light comes on, the nearest gas station is a welcome sight. When you are 30,000 feet in the air, flying at hundreds of miles per hour over vast emptiness and your low fuel light comes on, you can’t pull into the nearest Conoco or Chevron, so the sight of a KC-135 hovering over you is welcome relief.

Fairchild is one of 37 bases in the



Another successful refueling mission by Fairchild personnel

course – which has them sleeping in the woods, scavenging for bugs and plants, and facing lonely, isolated days – it is well worth the experience. DeLano recognizes and appreciates the importance of what the survival school does for the students. “That we make a difference,” is what he values most about the program. “We hear stories time and time again; a survivor will come back and say ‘you made a difference’. I’ve done





The Air Force's fleet of planes serve as our defenders in the sky.

U.S. that have KC-135 aircraft. Some are active duty - like Fairchild - the others are Air National Guard or Reserve. Refueling is one of Fairchild's greatest missions, which makes them one of the most important pieces in the overall picture of our Air Force.

The planes, built in the late 1950s, hold ten precious tanks of fuel, ready to feed hungry military planes in the sky. That translates into roughly 200,000 pounds of fuel, or 31,000 gallons. (Makes your 12-gallon tank fill-up not seem so painful!) When the boom operator connects to the recipient plane, they are able to offload 6,000 pounds of fuel per minute, draining from the ten tanks which are peppered throughout the plane: three tanks are in each wing, and four of them run down the body of the aircraft. The KC-135 planes can also hold passengers and cargo, with a capacity for up to 83,000 pounds of cargo, depending on how much fuel is in the plane. All of this makes the KC-135 - and the service men and women who fly them - one of the finest sights in the sky.

The importance of these planes and the fuel they provide is well known throughout the military. According to the KC-135 Stratotanker Fact Sheet from the Department of the Air Force, "In Southeast Asia, KC-135 Stratotankers made the air war different from all previous aerial conflicts. Midair refueling brought far-flung bombing targets within reach. Combat aircraft, no longer limited by fuel supplies, were able to spend more time in target areas." The 92<sup>nd</sup> ARW has been involved in virtually every contingency mission around the world since 1994.

"It's kind of like playing a video game," says boom operator and Senior Airman Moon about the process of refueling another plane. A seasoned professional with a multitude of refuelings under his, shall we say, wings, Moon doesn't seem phased by the daunting and dangerous task of lying on his stomach in the underbelly of a plane, looking through a window down onto a multi-million dollar piece of military equipment hovering below him, maneuvering the boom perfectly into its target and then pumping it full of flammable fuel. As he does this he bears the responsibility of keeping the other pilot and plane safe, as well as his own - all while speeding through the air at over 530 miles per hour. "That's the basic mission of Fairchild!" he says with a smile.

That pride in Fairchild and its mission extends beyond the

gates of the base. Fairchild AFB truly belongs to the people of Spokane is a part of the community. According to the Department of the Air Force's Fairchild AFB History, "...many Spokane businesses and local citizens donated money to purchase land for the base. At a cost of \$125,000, these people bought 1,400 acres and presented the title to the War Department in January 1942. That year, the government designated \$14 million to purchase more land and begin construction of a new Spokane Army Air Depot."

The name was changed from Spokane Army Air Depot to Spokane Air Force Base six years later, in January 1948. Two years later, the name of the base was once again changed, this time in memory of General Muir S. Fairchild, the Air Force Vice Chief of Staff, and a native of Washington state. Despite the change in name, Fairchild remains as it has from the beginning: a vital and welcome part of the Spokane community. **S**

## KC-135 Stratotanker Facts:

- **Wingspan: 130 feet, 10 inches (39.88 meters)**
- **Length: 136 feet, 3 inches (41.53 meters)**
- **Speed: 530 miles per hour at 30,000 feet (9,144 meters)**
- **Ceiling: 50,000 feet**
- **Range: 1,500 miles with 150,000 pounds of fuel**
- **Max. Takeoff Weight: 322,500 pounds**
- **Max. Transfer Fuel Load: 200,000 pounds**
- **Thrust: 21,634 pounds each engine**

## Survival School (SERE) Facts:

**Mission:** "To safely prepare America's aircrews for global survivability anytime, anywhere, and return with honor."

**Motto:** "Return with honor."

## According to the 2005 Fiscal Year Economic Impact Statement for Fairchild AFB:

- **The direct dollar impact on local economy is \$130,251,305**
- **Gross payroll of personnel employed is \$206,545,128**
- **922 personnel live on base, 2,113 living off-base; 3,097 dependents living on base**
- **Total personnel employed on Base 5,383**
- **Total annual gross payroll is \$169,800,637**