

1,000,000

Air Force, CAP mark millionth
Global War on Terror sortie



Photo by Steve Cox, CAP National Headquarters

Maj. John Henderson, right, co-pilot of the Gippsland GA8 Airvan, consults a map during the mock intercept flight as pilot Col. Gene Hartman looks on.

By Steve Cox

It was a sky-high celebration of a U.S. Air Force milestone — the millionth sortie in support of the Global War on Terror. But it was no big deal to at least one Civil Air Patrol pilot.

“We do it a lot,” said Col. Gene Hartman, two hours after the Gippsland GA8 Airvan he piloted was on the receiving end of a dazzling display of U.S. air power near the nation’s capital.

Two D.C. Air National Guard F-16 Fighting Falcons scrambled out of Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland, then encircled the CAP plane as it orbited above the gently rolling Piedmont region of Virginia. Within seconds of their arrival, the sky was buzzing with the roar of the lightning-quick jets, which circled the plane several times before pushing it out of the training airspace.

The aerial acrobatics were part of Operation Noble Eagle, North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD)'s commitment to protect American skies that began on Sept. 14, 2001. Since the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, the Air Force has flown over a million missions in the Global War on Terror.

The millionth Operation Noble Eagle sortie was flown April 19 out of Balad Air Base in Iraq by a 421st Expeditionary Fighter Squadron from Hill Air Force Base in Utah. The squadron's mission was to provide close air support to U.S. Army ground units by identifying explosive devices and device emplacements near Balad Air Base.

The mock intercept of the Civil Air Patrol plane helped commemorate the Air Force's milestone flight. It was the centerpiece of the April 29 celebration, which was recorded by Fox News in Washington.

Jennifer Griffin, national security correspondent for Fox, rode one of the 113th Fighter Wing F-16s that flew over national landmarks in New York City, while her producer, Justin Finkel, and a Fox cameraman boarded a 459th Air Refueling Wing KC-135 tanker to record refueling of the two F-16s high above the Chesapeake Bay. Another Fox cameraman and a sound man hitched a ride in CAP's GA8. Live reports from Andrews AFB the next day on "Fox & Friends" and other Fox News shows, as well as the Fox News Web site, reached an estimated 6.4 million viewers.

CAP active on homefront

April 29 was just another day of flying for Hartman, a veteran of the Air Force and Air National Guard who now serves as homeland security director for CAP's Middle East Region. "We've been doing this since shortly after 9/11," said Hartman, a slim,

fit retired pilot from Springfield, Va., who donned his favorite bright orange driving gloves for the historic intercept flight. "We do this at least once a month," he said. "There are a lot of homeland security-type things we do."

Maj. John Henderson of CAP's Maryland Wing was Hartman's co-pilot. It was the first intercept mission for Henderson, a tall, imposing man with neatly cropped hair who serves as his wing's deputy chief of staff for special missions. "We're just getting involved with these missions now, so I wanted to get the experience," he said.

Henderson, a Baltimore firefighter who regularly flies for Civil Air Patrol, was impressed to be part of the intercept flight. "It looked pretty good, actually," he said afterwards, as he posed with Hartman for a photo near the same F-16s that had chased him earlier in the day.



Col. Gene Hartman



Maj. John Henderson

One or two sorties a day

Members of the 113th Fighter Wing at Andrews AFB scramble one or two sorties a day in defense of U.S. airspace. They also regularly train with CAP's citizen volunteers to test their threat-intercept procedures. The April 29 intercept was typical, despite its historic significance.

In the beginning, crosswinds on the Andrews airstrip were a concern, delaying the flight for about 30 minutes. The whipping winds were evident throughout much of the afternoon, rocking the Gippsland GA8 Airvan as it was boarded outside the CAP hangar at Andrews.

The intercept at a glance

1248: Hartman cranks the engine and a series of flight checks begins. He then rolls the GA8 toward the airstrip, where Henderson points out an Air Force One “touch-and-go” on the runway, directly in front of the CAP plane. It appears Air Force One pilots are taking advantage of the windy conditions to practice approaches and takeoffs.

1305: “CAP Flight 9908, you’re cleared,” radios the Andrews AFB control tower. With that, Hartman gently guides the GA8 toward the runway. A lot of traffic is ahead of the aircraft.

1310: The KC-135 tanker moves slowly toward the end of the airstrip, slightly ahead of the CAP plane but behind the F-16s, which are stacked side by side, ready for takeoff. “We’re a little behind the power curve time-wise,” says Hartman, “but this is better than being in the air and in a holding pattern.”

1320: The F-16s (with Griffin in tow) bolt down the runway and leap into the gray sky almost simultaneously, one right after the other. Minutes later, the huge refueling tanker moves toward the runway in front of the GA8.

1336: The GA8 is standing by near the end of the airstrip as the tanker moves almost effortlessly down the runway, slowly lifting into the sky. Soon afterward Hartman radios the tower. “Into position and hold,” he says, before going through another series of checks with Henderson.

1340: Air Force One touches down, just over the left wing of the GA8. Almost immediately, the words “clear for takeoff, 9908” come from the tower. With that, Hartman quickly moves into position at the end of the runway. Two minutes later, the GA8 is airborne. Hartman steers the aircraft to

An Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcon approaches a CAP Gippsland GA8 Airvan during a mock intercept exercise staged to celebrate the millionth sortie flown by the Air Force in the Global War on Terror.

the left, which provides a quick look at Air Force One parked just outside its massive hangar.

1350: The CAP GA8 is humming along the wind-whipped Potomac River. As the aircraft moves farther away from Andrews, visibility improves.

1405: Hartman announces the aircraft is moving into the Farmville MOA (military operating area), a golf-club-shaped chunk of airspace over Virginia where the intercept is to occur. Farmland lies below, gently rolling land with a picturesque country estate every mile or so. The fields surrounding the farmhouses are a canvas of earth colors, from dusty brown to lush green. They give the ground the patterned look of a patchwork quilt.

1410: The GA8 orbits at about 4,000 feet, floating right under the thick wall of clouds as the plane heads south, farther into the MOA. Thirty minutes later, Hartman makes radio contact with the F-16s and goes into a holding pattern. The F-16s are apparently en route from New York City to Chesapeake Bay, where they will rendezvous in midair with the KC-135 for refueling.

1455: The holding pattern continues, with Hartman meticulously steering the GA8 in a circle.

1508: After about a dozen turns over the Farmville MOA, the two F-16s are sighted on radar, an estimated eight miles from the GA8. “They’re right on top of each other,” says Henderson. Moments later, the F-16s are buzzing all around the GA8, skating along the rim of the clouds in front of the aircraft before dipping down behind it, casting a fast-moving shadow over the farmland below. “That’ll definitely get your attention,” says Henderson. Hartman estimates the F-16s are traveling around 200 mph while the CAP plane is orbiting along at a steady 115 or so.

1510: One of the F-16s moves closer to the GA8,

several thousand feet off the left wing. The sun peeks through the clouds, splashing across the F-16’s right wing as the pilot tilts it up and down toward the GA8. This creates a waving effect, intended to get the GA8 to follow the F-16 out of the area.

1512: “Thanks for the skyhook,” radios Hartman, before pulling the GA8 back toward Andrews AFB. “Let’s go home,” he says to the aircrew. “We’re done.”

1545: The sun breaks through the clouds on the long flight back to Andrews, but all is quiet in the cockpit of the GA8. Hartman steers the plane effortlessly out of the Farmville MOA, back across the Potomac. The sun illuminates the shallow water, which is not moving as much as before now that the wind has died down.

1552: The GA8 approaches Andrews. Henderson consults a map in preparation for the descent. About 20 minutes later, word comes from the control tower that it is OK to land. Hartman starts a slow descent toward Andrews.

1618: “Airport in sight,” says Henderson, who then makes a quick round of pilot checks. “Landing checklist complete,” announces Hartman, as he begins his approach.

1627: The GA8 floats softly down onto the huge runway. It is a flawless landing. Seconds later, Hartman taxis the plane off the airstrip and heads toward the CAP hangar. “CAP 9908 is clear of the runway,” he signals to the tower.

1630: Harman parks the GA8 near the hangar and removes his orange gloves.

The Operation Noble Eagle celebration flight was officially over. Another mission was complete.

One million sorties and counting ... ▲