

**Testimony of Colonel (ret.) Gene W. Blade
On Behalf of the City of Springfield, Illinois
Before the Base Closure and Realignment Commission
June 20, 2005**

Thank you Chairman Principi and members of the Commission for allowing me to testify before you today regarding the 183rd Air National Guard unit based at Abraham Lincoln Capital Airport in Springfield, Illinois.

My name is Gene W. Blade; I am a retired Army colonel and a member of the Peoria/Springfield BRAC committee.

I certainly agree with Mayor Davlin that the Air Force's decision to relocate the 183rd Fighter Wing is not consistent with the published BRAC criteria and should strongly be reconsidered by this Commission.

Keeping the 183rd Fighter Wing in Springfield is advantageous for many important reasons. I'm going to discuss two of those.

1. Military Readiness
2. Recruiting and retention

The 183rd FW mission is two fold:

- The Federal mission
- The State mission

This unit has a long and proud tradition in the fighter mission including the first unit with the F-84F in the 1950s and the F-4C in 1970s.

Since converting to the F-16 aircraft, this wing has proven itself continually with its Air Expeditionary Force (AEF) rotations and other demanding missions. I recently read in the AEFC news that the Air National Guard performs 34% of these missions for the Air Force.

One combat support unit, the 217th Engineering Installation Squadron, is also based with the wing. The Springfield based wing and combat support unit are authorized at 1,088 officers and airmen.

First, let me address the importance of the 183rd on military readiness.

From a training perspective, the current location of the 183rd FW is extremely advantageous. Regardless of weather, the F-16s of the 183rd get exceptional training because there are numerous training areas in every direction.

As a result, the wing almost never has to cancel a training run.

The 183d FW has access to a number of Military Operating Areas (MOAs) within 150 miles. This allows them to perform low and high level training, air interdiction, air to ground, Combat Search and Rescue and Counter air.

There are even several additional MOAs that are up to an additional 100 miles out which the unit can reach with just a few additional minutes of flight time.

The base has two active runways (8,000 ft and 7,000 ft) which adequately accommodate both commercial and fighter operations. The runways cross each other allowing for operations during most weather conditions.

Both runways are equipped with barrier arrests and instrument landing systems. In addition, the base has excess ramp capacity to accommodate future missions and/or mobilization requirements.

It is not surprising then, on the subject of Mission Capable Rates, to learn that the 183rd FW out-performed all other units for the reporting period of October 2001 to March 2005.

When I mention all other units, I am talking about in comparison to the other 5 sister Big Inlet Engine bases (115 FW Madison, WI; 120 FW Great Falls, MT; 140 FW Buckley, CO; 149 FW Kelly, TX; 187 FW Montgomery, AL).

The 183rd FW was above the Big Inlet average MC rate 83% of the time.

When we look at the Total Not Mission Capable Maintenance Rate, this condition occurs when aircraft cannot do assigned missions because of maintenance. We find that the 183rd again outperformed sister units 64% of the time. This consistently proves that reliable maintenance by an experienced workforce is a key factor to meeting Air Force homeland security mission requirements and force protection efforts abroad. The 183rd maintenance efforts and maintenance personnel have unquestionably proven to be of high military value to the U.S. Air Force.

The only way you achieve these results is to have a very dedicated workforce with many years of experience servicing the aircraft.

I am concerned that, if relocated, the 183rd will have difficulty maintaining this impressive record because of diminished training cycles and infrastructure assets.

[One final note. Boeing Phantom Works is working with the 183rd FW to test out a new decal that can be easily installed and removed. The benefit of this is that the decals are light weight (compared to paint) and can easily be removed during wartime. With the Boeing Corporate headquarters located in Illinois, it makes sense for the 183rd to remain in its current location so as to facilitate this existing relationship.]

Finally, the strength of recruiting at the 183rd is exceptional.

The State of Illinois provides benefits to its Guard members, that beats any state in the union, including educational opportunities, employment preference, and increased benefits for military families. This has allowed the 183rd to consistently maintain staffing levels above 100% of authorized positions. The 183rd also maintains a highly educated force with over 40% of its members holding college degrees.

- Of critical AFSCs, the 183rd FW has 774 authorized with 776 assigned. So, the 183rd FW is over 100% critically manned. Overall, the 183rd FW was manned over 100% until May of 2004.
- In the last year, Springfield's recruiting has dropped, yet their average recruiting levels are at 98.5%, (due to the temporary loss of a recruiter on medical leave) but still they are in the green.
- Additionally, many Air Guard pilots are commercial air line pilots. Being centrally located between Chicago and St. Louis certainly helps to recruit them.
- Here in Springfield we have two major hospitals and Southern Illinois University for Medicine from which to attract doctors into the Guard.
- I've been around this unit for over 30 years and they've always been at 100% or over of authorized positions unless they had a recent mission change in authorized strength levels. Recruiting just has never been a real problem for 183rd unit.

Additionally, the airport recently made available an additional 13 acres for the 183rd to meet security clearance distances for anti-terrorism/force protection. A new \$10,000,000 three-story composite command center building is nearly complete. It meets all the anti-terrorism/force protection DoD standards.

We have identified specific reasons why this decision should be reversed – not only because we value our Air National Guard base, but because the recommendation is not consistent with lawful BRAC criteria, nor does it improve military readiness or homeland security. This unit is being penalized for doing a superb job in flying missions, maintenance performance and recruiting performance. **Where is the reward for being one of the best??**

The loss of experienced air crews, maintenance, and flying support personnel on the total Air Force would be hard to replace in a timely manner. I don't believe the loss of flying experience and training dollar investment has been adequately considered in the military value model. Not only will the effectiveness of our present force be diminished, but it will take decades to return the force to anywhere approaching an equivalent level of performance that we have been accustomed to.

As General Heckman stated previously, "[T]here also seems to be a homeland security benefit to having smaller (18 aircraft) Guard units more spread out than concentrating 24 aircraft units into a smaller local. This would enable more airspace to be effectively covered in a time of emergency."

For this strategic reason, I fully agree with General Heckman. I believe this logic, combined with the unique attributes of the Capital Airport, dictates that the 183rd FW should continue to be based at its present location.

THE 183rdFW ALWAYS READY—ALWAYS THERE

SLEEP WELL TONIGHT YOUR NATIONAL GUARD IS AWAKE