

## 116th ACS member first enlisted weapons controller in Air Guard



Photo by Maj. Jim Gregory, 116th ACS  
Tech. Sgt. Homer Walden in front of some of the equipment he utilizes in his role as weapons controller for the 116th Air Control Squadron.

By Maj. Donna Prigmore, Public Affairs Officer, HQ, ORANG

Tech Sgt. Homer Walden, a weapons controller in the Oregon Air Guards 116th Air Control Squadron in Warrenton, made history this past summer when he became the first Air National Guard enlisted weapons director to graduate from Advanced Weapons Director School.

The six-month long school held at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada was established in 2000 for enlisted weapons directors with at least three years of experience and an in-depth knowledge of air control operations. The intent of the curriculum is to give seasoned active duty and Guard airmen and women an opportunity to train (at an advanced level) in a high stress, simulated wartime environment with multiple airframes flying actual combat-style missions.

Weapons directors, whether conducting real-world missions or training, communicate closely with fighter pilots in the sky to help them identify enemies and determine when and where to launch missile strikes. The directors (also referred to as controllers) use tactical radar units, scopes, and communication modules to scan large airspace for immediate threats to security and take action to eliminate them.



Walden, a ground-based weapons controller with more than eight years of air control experience, served as the class leader for AWDS Class 03-1. He graduated, along with a handful of active duty students, on June 13, 2003 to become the first weapons director in the ANG to attend the course.

Due to the complexity of the mission, each class is made up of only six students, with a 50/50 split between ground and air-based controllers. Across the U.S., there are approximately 500 controllers, 300 of which scan the skies using ground-based equipment. The other 200 operate as controllers in the sky while flying on board Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) aircraft.

According to Walden, the AWDS curriculum was developed, in part, from programs and syllabi already in place at the Fighter Weapons School (FWS), which is also conducted at Nellis AFB. The FWS operates a rigorous training program for aeronautically-rated officers who pass a difficult screening process and are selected to become weapons officers.

The officer-based FWS and the enlisted-based AWDS are held concurrently in order to maximize training among and between pilots and weapons controllers.

The staff at the (AWDS) schoolhouse use a building block approach by starting with small (combat) missions before introducing larger and larger ones, explained Walden. It is a very challenging course that requires a lot of experience.

Before the enlisted students are exposed to combat missions however, they are instructed on operational details of each aircraft in the Air Force inventory, including all bombers, fighters, refuelers, and NATO aircraft. According to Walden, knowing the different types of aircraft and their capabilities is important because of the partnership they have with fighter pilots in the air.

We control combat aircraft when they are performing their combat mission, whether it be air-to-air combat, combat air patrols, close-air support, or air-to-air refueling. It is a tough part of the curriculum but it is definitely needed.

According to Tech. Sgt. James Peters, NCOIC of standards and evaluations at AWDS, enlisted personnel were barred from serving as weapons directors up until 1993, when the results of a General Accounting Office study spawned personnel changes. Since then, hundreds of enlisted weapons directors have entered the career field and attended the required nine-month basic technical school in Arizona. The school includes six months of training at the Tucson Air National Guard Base and three months of training on modular equipment at Luke AFB.

The Guard and active duty (enlisted) weapons directors are just about par with each other, said Peters, when asked if any differences exist between the two military organizations. They (the Air Guard) are getting tasked as much as we are these days and really stepping up to the challenges.