



Operation Clear Skies

Air Defenders Deploy to Defend National Capital Region Against Terrorist Aerial Attacks

by Maj. Rousell Thomas & Maj. Kevin Hutchison

A 4-5 ADA Avenger with the Washington Monument in the background.

In mid-March, the Homeland Security Office ratcheted the Threat Alert Level up to “Orange,” and the news media began broadcasting startling images of Avenger air defense systems and Sentinel radars with the Washington Monument or U.S. Capitol looming in the background. A new phase of Operation Clear Skies, Air Defense Artillery’s slice of Homeland Air Security, was underway.

“Clear Skies” is the name of a series of air defense exercises and operations conducted by joint and interagency entities in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September, 11, 2001. Following these attacks, the Director of the Joint Staff initially tasked the Joint Air and Missile Defense Agency to assume the lead role for developing long-range operational concepts and architectures for the Homeland Air Defense mission areas (the National Capital Region—Washington, D.C.—and other key U.S. sites) in coordination with the North American Aerospace Defense (NORAD) Command and the Armed Forces. Homeland Air Defense is a subset of the interagency Homeland Air Security organization. An interagency group of subject-matter experts, including the Department of Defense, Intelligence, Law Enforcement/U.S. Customs, Civil Aviation, and joint military communities, was formed to address the full spectrum of Homeland Air Security.

Since the current concept of operations (CONOPS) and architecture were drafted, Clear Skies exercises have been the means to develop, validate and enhance these requirements for the HAD mission, in conjunction with Operation Noble Eagle.

NORAD and the joint community have conducted three Clear Skies exercises to date. Clear Skies I involved Sentinel radars and command and control elements from 1-3 ADA, 3rd Infantry Division, based at Fort Stewart, Georgia. One of the major goals of this exercise was to determine if Sentinel radars could effectively interface with and contribute to this experimental integrated air defense architecture. The Sentinel performed well, impressing the joint community with its low-level accuracy and rapid, Enhanced Position Location Reporting System or EPLRS-based update rate.

Clear Skies II was an exercise intended to test and validate the communications architecture and command and control structure that brought together multiple military and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) sensors and designated firing units. Sentinel Radars and Avengers equipped with slew-to-cue (STC) modifications from 4-5 ADA of the 1st Cavalry Division at Fort Hood, Texas, deployed to the National Capital

Region area for the exercise. STC allows the Avenger to be digitally cued, preventing the gunner from having to search the sky for the target.

With very little notice, the exercise suddenly evolved into an actual operation. When officials, reacting to information about possible terrorist attacks, decided to up the threat level to Orange during last year’s commemoration of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, 4-5 ADA was ordered to upload its Avenger systems with live missiles. This marked the first time since the early 1960s that the military had uploaded live missiles on military equipment in our nation’s capitol. The Department of Defense released the following statement:

The Secretary of Defense announced today a transition of air defense assets from Exercise Clear Skies II into an Operation Noble Eagle deployment. This transition involves the movement of missiles from storage in the local area to the deployed systems, beginning later today. This is not a response to any specific threat, but is a prudent precaution to increase the radar and air defense posture in the National Capital Region. For security and deterrent reason, we will not disclose exact locations of the air defense equipment.

The soldiers from Fort Hood adapted well to the change in mission, performing their duties very professionally and impressing joint and interagency personnel throughout the National Capitol Region.

Clear Skies III was an exercise conducted to continue tests and evaluations that could not be completed in Clear Skies II because the deployment changed from an exercise to an operation. The mission, again assigned to 4-5 ADA soldiers, was conducted at another key site outside of the NCR to allow more freedom in the conduct of the exercise and enhance data collection efforts. Again the soldiers from 4-5 ADA performed brilliantly, having diligently applied their lessons learned from Clear Skies II and focusing their training for the unique requirements associated with Homeland Air Security.



4-5 ADA air defenders emplace a Sentinel radar to watch the skies over the National Capital Region.

All three exercises were designed to conduct operational tests and evaluations of integrated air defense procedures in support of Operation Noble Eagle. The testing community has collected and analyzed significant data to validate the architecture and performance of the various interagency systems and platforms involved in the exercises. Preliminary analysis indicates that the Sentinel radar is one of the most accurate radars available to protect our nation from aerial threat. Initial reports also verify the correct function of the STC system and the

enhanced reaction time that STC provides, particularly in an urban environment. Organizations at the U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery School have been present at Clear Skies I-III to assist in the development and refinement of tactics, techniques, and procedure for future Homeland Defense operations, and to capture that information for publication.

One of the lessons learned from previous versions of this exercise is the importance of proper use of ground-positioning systems during initialization or emplacement. The only times the Sentinels or Avengers provided poor data or did not function properly was when their location or DLRP was incorrect. Likewise, when moving a firing platform from a hide position to a firing position, it is essential to keep the LandNav function on so that digital information displays are correct in relation to positional data—particularly for STC operations.

Key participants in Clear Skies from the ADA community have been the 32nd Army Air and Missile Defense Command, 35th ADA Brigade, Fort Bliss Army Training and Evaluation Center, 1-3 ADA, 24th Infantry Division; 4-5 ADA, 1st Cavalry Division; U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command System Management Office-Lower Tier, Directorate of Training Doctrine, U.S. Army Air Defense Artillery School; and the Operational Test Command.

In April, 2003, 170 soldiers from the 1st Battalion, 204th Air Defense Artillery, arrived at Fort Bliss. These Mississippi Army National Guard soldiers will train to relieve 4-5 ADA soldiers in the continuing defense of the National Capital Region.

As the Army continues its transformation towards the objective force, Army leadership is seriously considering the relevancy of many weapons platforms and systems. Our inclusion and participation in these integrated air defense exercises and operations—at the request of NORAD and the Department of Defense—is indicative of the significant contributions of the air and missile defense force to Homeland Air Security in defeating any future asymmetrical aerial threats to our nation.

With our powerful radars, proven firing platforms—which will only improve when the SLAMRAAM is fielded—and the impressive digital situational awareness and sensor-to-shooter link provided by the Air and Missile Defense Planning and Control System suite of equipment, we are one of the few systems identified in a recent Future Combat Systems (FCS) White Paper as having technology advanced enough to be included in the FCS command and control system.

We are proving our relevance daily by executing missions that no other asset can in protecting our nation's skies with technology that is ahead of our contemporaries.

“...And our current forecast calls for continued Clear Skies across the nation.”

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