

# 6917<sup>th</sup> SECURITY GROUP

## LINEAGE

6917<sup>th</sup> Radio Group, Mobile  
6917<sup>th</sup> Security Group

## STATIONS

San Vito dei Normanni Air Station, Italy, 1 Jul 1961-1 Oct 1978

## ASSIGNMENTS

## COMMANDERS

## HONORS

**Service Streamers**

**Campaign Streamers**

**Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers**

## Decorations

|              |       |                      |
|--------------|-------|----------------------|
| 6917TH SCTYG | AFOUA | 1 JAN 66 - 31 MAY 67 |
|              | AFOUA | 1 JUN 67 - 31 MAY 68 |
|              | AFOUA | 1 JAN 69 - 31 DEC 69 |
|              | AFOUA | 1 JAN 70 - 31 DEC 70 |
|              | AFOUA | 1 JUL 76 - 30 JUN 78 |

## EMBLEM

## EMBLEM SIGNIFICANCE

## MOTTO

## NICKNAME

## OPERATIONS

6917th Radio Group Mobile—1961-1963

As with other air stations where a USAFSS unit was the dominant tenant at the time, USAFSS assumed control of San Vito AS upon activating the station. The 6917th grew rapidly from the start and became the 6917th Radio Group Mobile in 1961. In 1963 as part of a command-wide unit redesignation, the 6917th RGM became the 6917th Security Group. On 1 October 1978, the 6917th SG became a tenant organization on San Vito AS, as the 7275th Air Base Group assumed responsibility for support functions on base. A similar realignment occurred at other USAFSS units/bases throughout the world.

#### San Vito's First WAF's

In the early 1970's, USAFSS began training female airmen— gender equality eliminated the term WAF's—in the Morse intercept, linguist and analyst career fields, with subsequent follow-on overseas assignments to San Vito, Chicksands, Karamursel and Misawa. In early 1972, the first four female airmen arrived on San Vito Air Station. A wing of Dormitory 2 was set aside for the station's "Fair Force." Later as additional female airmen arrived, Dorm 2 became an all-female billets. By the mid-1980's, a high percentage of the 6917th ESG Morse intercept operators, Russian linguists and analysts were female.

On 9 November 1989, Bruno Calo' was sipping a glass of wine nl home when a news flash reflected what amounted to the huginning of the end of the Cold War. Thousands of spirited East Uorliners were demolishing the Berlin Wall. In turn, with the collapse of the Soviet Union only a matter of time, Bruno saw the handwriting on the wall that San Vito dei Normanni Air Station's days were numbered. It was all too clear in the minds of all base inhabitants (military, civilian and local nationals) that with the disappearance of the hostile East European and Soviet bloc Communist governments, the intelligence gathering unit at San Vito would have no mission. Nonetheless, new construction on San Vito proceeded as planned, and life on base continued normally for about three more years.

Col. Neil Patton, 7275th Air Base Group Commander at San Vito, announced the forthcoming base closure on 14 August 1992. In two years time, San Vito Air Station would cease to exist; at least that was the announced plan. Col. Eugene Beauvais, commander of the 6917th ESG in 1992, received the same announcement, but the Air Force Intelligence Command (successor command to the Electronic Security Command) had plans to discontinue 6917th operations significantly sooner than 1994.

#### 6917<sup>TM</sup> ESG DEACTIVATED

In October 1992, Brig. Gen. Kenneth A. Minihan, Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, U.S. Air Force, returned to San Vito as guest speaker at the last 6917th ESG Dining Out. As a lieutenant colonel and colonel, Minihan was the 6917th commander at San Vito from 1985-1987. He found it depressing to see the 6917n in a downward spiral after he'd worked so hard building up the organization during his command, including winning the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award. The Dining Out paid tribute to Col. Beauvais who had completed his tour as 69 if1 commander and was rotating to America.

Rather than replace Col. Beauvais with another O-6, Maj. Gen. Gary O'Shaughnessy, AFIC commander, appointed Maj. Paul Gifford, 6917th operations officer, to command the 6917" ESG during the group's phase down and close out. Both the U.S. Naval Security Group and the 6917th

ESG shut down operations at San Vito at 24:00 on 31 March 1993. A formal 6917th ESG deactivation occurred in April. Classified AFIC holdings from the 6917th ESG were transferred to the 26th Intelligence Group at Ramstein, Germany. The former 6917th ESG operations compound remained a restricted area—Special Forces personnel took over the compound for their classified operations and communications facility.

#### New Interim Mission for San Vito AS

In February of 1993, Special Forces units from a number of countries came to San Vito AS to provide SAR (search and rescue) and other support for ongoing activities in the Balkans. First, it was the food air drops, then it was support to war operations in Kosovo. The Special Forces aircraft operated out of the Italian Air Force base at Casale and Brindisi Airport while the troops were billeted at San Vito AS. When the 6917th moved out of the operations compound on 1 April 1993, the Joint Special Operations Task Force commander took control of the compound. His command, control and communications elements were ecstatic at finding a facility that already had secure communications, a building with solid walls, etc. They usually landed in an open field and constructed everything from scratch.

#### 6917th Final Days at San Vito AS

Maj. Gifford departed Italy in June 1993, leaving behind a small contingent to make final disposition of equipment. That contingent departed in the late summer of 1993; the only vestige of former SIGINT equipment that remained at San Vito AS was the FLR-9 Elephant Cage system. Under contract to the U.S. Air Force, an Italian contractor finally dismantled the FLR-9 in the spring of 2002.

#### DET 1,6917<sup>TM</sup> ESG

Colocated at San Vito AS, Detachment 1, 6917th ESG, was assigned administratively to the 6917th, although each had separate missions. Known on the air station as the "radome," Detachment 1 was the Comfy165 Cloud component of Comfy Cobalt—a HQ USAF covert program with strictly enforced need-to-know access.

Dul 1, 6917th ESG was activated in the early 1980's and itponitcd a few months after the 6917th was deactivated, reporting during those final months directly to HQ European Electronic Neeirity Division. Capt. Randy James was Det 1's last commander Ililnlc 1993.

#### San Vito AS Today—Solar Observatory

In 1986, the U.S. Air Force installed at San Vito AS a solar observatory—one of six global sites in the Air Force's Solar Illectro-Optical Network. The sites are strategically located worldwide to ensure 24-hour sun monitoring. Reporting to the 55th Space Weather Support Squadron, Schriever AFB, Colorado, the observatory operates seven days a week year-round. The observatory's mission involves reporting real-time solar events.

A defense contractor runs the San Vito Solar Observatory. Involved in the operation of the Solar Observatory in 2006, Joseph L Hauschild was the 6917th ESG's last link to San Vito dei Normanni Air Station. He previously served two tours with the 6917th (1977-1981 and 1983-1987) as an environmental health specialist. Except for the observatory, San Vito AS currently has the eerie

appearance of a ghost town. Buildings and infrastructure are slowly crumbling away while the base remains on standby status for Balkan contingencies.

### Bruno Calo's Final Days at San Vito AS

The San Vito dei Normanni Air Station story would be incomplete without addressing Bruno Calo's final days as a U.S. Air Force employee on the base. Even with San Vito AS being kept open to support NATO missions, the local national staffing on base had been reduced to 26 Italians, including Mr. Calo'. With the staff judge advocate's office deactivated, in August 1994 Bruno became the attorney-advisor-translator for the new 7275th Air Base Squadron (Provisional) commander.

The next five years at San Vito AS were pretty much a blur for Bruno Calo'. During that time, American military personnel served on temporary duty tours of 120 days or less at the station. Recapping the history of the air station's final months, Bruno calculates that he served fourteen commanders between September 1994 and December 1999.

Finally, Calo's 40 years with the U.S. Air Force reached an inglorious end on 29 February 2000 when clerks from the civilian personnel office, Aviano Air Base, handed out checks to him and 24 fellow Italian workers and withdrew their San Vito AS entry passes.

The end was quite impersonal with not so much as a halfhearted "thank you." But Bruno Calo' is not resentful. While San Vito dei Normanni Air Station's chaotic fate is still to be decided, he has fond memories of many "marvelous" Americans he had the fortune to meet in the past 40 years, and he loves America as his second country.

A similar event had occurred five years earlier at RAF Chicksands, England, where an Air Intelligence Agency team discontinued SIGINT operations at the base. USAFSS airmen had commenced operations at Chicksands in 1950—rushed into operation in part by the "Berlin Blockade."

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Air Force Order of Battle

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### Sources

Fixed operations for USAFSS improved significantly when the first AN/ FLR-9 "Elephant Cage" antennas reached operational status in 1964 with the 6950 SS at RAF Chicksands, England, and the 6917 55, San Vito Air Station (AS), Italy. Other "Elephant Cages" entered service throughout the 1960s, including the operational antennas with the 6922 55 at Clark AB, the Philippines, the 6981 SS at Elmendorf AMC Alaska, the 6920 SS, Misawa AB, Japan, the 6933 SS, Karamursel AS, Turkey, and the 6913 SS at Augsburg, Germany. Other important USAFSS (and later ESC) field sites included Iraklion AS, Crete, Wakkanai AS, Japan and Shu Lin Kou AS, Taiwan. The introduction of several high technology systems like CATS, STRAWHAT and TEBO at USAFSS ground sites during this time further automated many time and labor intensive unit field operations.

In the spring of 1960, USAFSS activated the 6917th Radio Squadron Mobile at San Vito dei Normanni Air Station, a relatively small 318-acre site located some 300 miles southeast of Rome on Italy's boot heel near the port city of Brindisi. Base facilities were still under construction when the first airmen arrived. The early station pioneers lived on per diem in the Jolly Hotel near the train station in Brindisi awaiting completion of the dormitories and mess hall. Base power was provided in the early days by portable generators.

Col. John McVey was the initial commander for the base and the 6917th RSM. Maj. Tortoriello, the squadron's first operations officer, commenced operations with a four-flight around-the-clock schedule in the August-September 1960 period. Initially, airmen served on unaccompanied tours, with military families authorized to join sponsors at San Vito in 1962.

In March 2006, retired Air Force Senior MSgt. Clarence Hall Jr. discussed with the author a USAFSS site survey that occurred in the San Vito area in January 1959. Assigned to the 6911th Radio Group Mobile at Darmstadt, Germany, as a Morse intercept operator, Sgt. Hall, Airman Al Thurston and several other Morse operators conducted a hearability study a few miles from Brindisi—presumably at the future site of San Vito dei Normanni Air Station.

Headed by a Capt. Turensky, the team flew with their intercept equipment (housed in two H-1 vans) aboard C-130 from Rhein-Main AB to the Brindisi civilian airport. Living in a hotel in Brindisi (probably Jolly Hotel), the team parked their H-1 trailers in a field outside of town, strung out some antennas, and commenced intercept operations for about six weeks. Clarence Hall recalls that there was quite a bit of excitement about the success of their exploratory mission since they were able to intercept target signals that USAFSS sites elsewhere were unable to detect. Hall can not recall the specific dates of the site survey, but it occurred shortly before he rotated from Germany in May 1959.

The 6917th RSM functioned inconspicuously at San Vito for nine months before the Air Force decided to have a coming-out party. On Monday, 10 April 1961, Maj. Gen. Millard Lewis (USAFSS Commander) and the Hon. Italo Giulio Caiati (Italian Undersecretary of Defense and a Brindisi native) officiated in the on-station dedication ceremony.

Attending dignitaries included Gen. Frederic H. Smith Jr. (USAFE Commander), Italian Air Force generals, the Prefect of Brindisi, Archbishop of Brindisi, and the mayors of San Vito,

Brindisi, Mesagne, Carovigno and Ostuni. A 6917th RSM air force formation paid tribute at the ceremony with a pomp and circumstance that reverberated through the local community for decades.

The official ribbon-cutting ceremony took place in the Dorm 1 parking lot at 18:00 hours, with an official banquet in the dining hall afterwards. Bruno Calo', an English-speaking Italian lawyer who began work with the station staff judge advocate's office in February 1961, served as official translator at the event.

Continuing as a U.S. Air Force employee at San Vito for 39 years, Bruno has become the station's unofficial historian. In June 2000, he wrote about the dedication ceremony, citing two important reasons that day remains burned in his memory forever: "one public, the official opening (they called it 'dedication') of San Vito dei Normanni Air Station; the other a very private one, for 10 April 1961 is the LAST day in my life when I got drunk."

Bruno had certain trepidations about mistakes in his translations of the official orators' speeches, but fear of a nightmare turned to elation when the ceremony ended with no serious blunders. At the banquet, everyone patted Bruno on the back for a "terrific" job; all of a sudden he was very popular. About 21:00 hours, the group moved to the Officers Club, just across from the dining hall. A band was playing pop music, and the bar was crowded, essentially all males since there were only four dependent wives at San Vito AS in 1961. While he was drinking moderately at the bar, several young officers kept telling Bruno that he was the hero of the day, "patting my back, offering to buy me all sort of drinks (which I found difficult to refuse.)" The drinks flowed like water, and Bruno got plastered—dead drunk.

About 3 a.m., Rodrigo Ravaioli, the club manager, woke up Bruno and asked him to leave so Rodrigo could close the club. Outside the club, as Bruno zigzagged unsteadily towards his Fiat 600 auto in the big lot in front of the 6917th compound, a couple of security policemen picked him up and plied him with strong black coffee in the dining hall. Eventually, Bruno attempted to walk to his car; he was wearing a new black tuxedo, purchased specifically for the ceremony. Between the headquarters building and compound parking lot, he staggered into a ditch along the road. He fell face-first into the ditch, but ended up flat on his back in four inches of rain water and mud.

As the icy water woke Bruno up, he stared at a sky full of stars asking himself "if I was in heaven or what." The mud had completely ruined his tuxedo, but he somehow found his car and drove to his hotel in Brindisi. The night watchman helped him to his room and poured him into bed. The time was early Tuesday morning; Bruno didn't wake up until Wednesday morning when his boss from San Vito knocked on his door, worried as to whether he was dead or alive. Embarrassed, Bruno carried his massive

headache to work, promising never again to get drunk. Through four decades of work with the Air Force at San Vito, Bruno Calo' proudly kept that promise.

### San Vito's "Elephant Cage"

The 6917th RSM began operations using temporary antennas installed in a vineyard behind the medical clinic, but a contract was already underway for the world's first AN/FLR-9 for the unit. In 1959, the Rome Air Development Center, Griffiss AFB, New York, contracted with Sylvania Electronic Systems to build two FLR-9 systems—one at San Vito AS, Italy and one at RAF Chicksands, England. Sylvania installed the FLR-9 at San Vito between August 1961 and May 1962; the company installed the second FLR-9 at Chicksands during 1962-63.

FLR-9, 6917th ESG, Brindisi, Italy, 1984

Under a second contract, Sylvania installed additional FLR-9 systems at Misawa AB, Japan; Clark AB, Philippines; Elmendorf AFB, Alaska; and Karamursel, Turkey—the latter being installed in 1966. A discontinuation of USAFSS operations in Pakistan canceled the delivery of a planned FLR-9 in that country. Under a U.S. Army contract, two additional FLR-9 antenna systems were delivered to Augsburg, Germany, and Udorn, Thailand, in 1970.

The 6917th Electronic Security Group at San Vito dei Normanni AS, Italy, operates a connecting link in the worldwide communications network and provides support to U.S., Italian and NATO forces on mutual defense objectives. The 6917th provides rapid radio relay, secure communications and electrical transmission security. The unit also does research into electronic phenomena, provides direction-finding assistance to air-sea rescue efforts, and navigational aid to aircraft and ships.

The base is located in the southwest portion of Italy (in the "boot"). It was the first site that a "Flare 9" antenna was installed, and the "elephant cage" still dominates the scenery in the area.

The port city of Brindisi has historic roots as far back as 6 B.C. The Appian Way, famed road connecting Rome with Greece and the Middle East during Roman times, terminates at Brindisi. Navies from many countries have used and continue to use Brindisi port, and it is a commercial gateway to the entire Mediterranean.

The station boasts some 3,500 people including Army, Navy and Air Force personnel, family members, civilian and Italian employees. The base is currently in the midst of a massive upgrade — virtually every facility on base has been or is scheduled for renovation.

The new consolidated open mess features casual, "Top-3", and officers' lounges, dining room, pizza pub and ballroom. The base community center includes a newly-expanded exchange and four seasons, cafeteria, foodland shoppette, barber and beauty shops, post office, dry cleaners, gift shop, electronic repair, military clothing sales, and tailor shop.

The base also has a commissary, medical and dental clinics, chapel, theater, fitness center, recreation center, nine-hole golf course with clubhouse, hobby shops, swimming pool and sports fields.

The Youth Benefit Telethon, an annual three-day event filled with money-making schemes to benefit base youth organizations, and the Fourth of July Carnival are highlights of the on-base social calendar. The Puglia region Special Olympics for local handicapped citizens is hosted annually by the base.

Every aspect of the games, from coaching to food preparation, is run by volunteers from organizations on station, family members and base Italian employees.

Intramural and base-level sports are also important recreational programs. 6917th members have the

opportunity to compete in softball (slow and fast pitch), flag football, basketball, soccer, volleyball, tennis, racquetball, darts, bowling and golf.

Two Department of Defense Dependents' Schools are located on base. The elementary school serves grades kindergarten through six and the high school grades seven through 12. A pre-school for three- and four-year olds is also available.

Two styles of base housing are available to personnel E-4 and above at San Vito; however, the average wait for government quarters is 19-24 months.

Plans are finalized and ground broken for a 150-unit American housing project in the nearby town of Mesagne which will alleviate some of the housing crunch, but for now, living downtown for much of a tour is a reality for all incoming people.

The cost of living is low in the rural agricultural area, and living off-base can be an adventure. If you're prepared to be flexible and accept a different standard of living, residing on the economy can be very rewarding. Open air markets hosted by a different town each day offer everything from fresh fruits and cheeses to clothing, furniture and household goods — all available by bargaining for the best price.

At nearby Alberobello, the open market winds through the streets between the famous white-washed Trulli houses which symbolize southern Italy. Opportunities for travel throughout Europe abound. The base tour office can help you arrange travel to West Germany, Austria and Switzerland, to name a few. Ferry boats depart daily to Athens and several popular Greek island vacation spots.

6917th ESG San Vito, Italy 1 Aug '79-31 Mar '93

Det 1, 6917th ESG (5 San Vito, Italy Early 80's-Late '93

6917TH ESG

AFOUA

1 JUL 80 - 30 JUN 82

Operation EL DORADO CANYON: On 14 April, Air Force and Navy aircraft conducted a nighttime air strike against the Libyan SA-5 complex at Surte, the Al-Azziziyah Barracks in Tripoli, the Benghazi military barracks, the Benina military airfield, the military side of Tripoli airport, and terrorist training facilities in the port of Sidi Bilal. Between 13-18 April, ESC units in Europe provided intelligence support to U.S. activities against Libya. This support involved special taskings for the 6917 ESG, 6931 ESS, 6950 ESG, and RC-135 /RJ crews from the 6916 ESS. HQ ESE served as the in-theater ESC executive agent for this effort. The RC-135 provided intelligence support to Sixth Fleet elements during the central Mediterranean operations and later to the Search and Rescue efforts for a downed F-111. 1986

On 1 August, the 6917 ESG at San Vito, Italy, inactivated. 1992

6917th ESG San Vito, Italy 1 Aug '79-31 Mar '93  
Det 1, 6917th ESG San Vito, Italy Early 80's-Late '93