

AIR GUARD ANNIVERSARY

THE COLORADO AIR NATIONAL GUARD CELEBRATES A CENTURY OF SERVICE

BY MARK BINGHAM

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The Colorado Air National Guard (CO ANG) is celebrating 100 years of military aviation in the State of Colorado during 2023, as well as 76 years since Colorado was established with the very first federally recognized Air National Guard unit in the United States under the newly formed US Air Force. In recognition of these milestones, Lt. General Mike Lowe gave a presentation on 6 May on the current status and the future mission of the Air National Guard, in general, and for the CO ANG specifically. General Lowe's presentation hinted at the possibility of the CO ANG upgrading from its

current fleet of F-16C+ aircraft to F-35 Lightning IIs sometime in the not-to-distant future, depending upon military budget allocations.

Thereafter, a change of command ceremony for the 140th Wing was conducted and Commander Col. Jeremiah Tucker was instated. I was fortunate to attend both events, and I have to say that, even with all of the terrible and embarrassing things going on in today's current events and political landscape, I was struck by the professional atmosphere of this organization and I was incredibly proud to be an American. These National Guardsmen (and Guardswomen) reflected all that is

good about our great country. And there is nothing more patriotic than five F-16s and an F-35 repeatedly roaring over the top of the hangar in passes after the completion of the national anthem.

To celebrate these milestones and events, the 120th Fighter Squadron organized a Heritage Flight reflecting the past, present, and future of the CO ANG, consisting of a P-51D Mustang, a current F-16C+ Viper that was specially painted with various Colorado and anniversary depictions, and a F-35 Lightning II from Burlington, Vermont (the very first F-35 Air National Guard installment). The photo ship for the Heritage Flight

was a F-16D (two-seat) out of the 120th Fighter Squadron, with USAF photograph

The origins of the CO ANG go back to 28 August 1917 and the establishment of the 120th Aero Squadron of the American Expeditionary Force during World War One. The unit served in France on the Western Front but then after the Armistice with Germany, the 120th was demobilized. The Militia Act of 1903 established the present National Guard system — military units raised by the states but paid for by the federal government and liable for immediate state service. If federalized by presidential order, these units fall under the regular military chain of command. On 1 June 1920, the Militia Bureau issued Circular No. 1 on organization of National Guard air units.

On 27 June 1923, the 120th Observation Squadron, 45th Division, Aviation, was mustered into service as part of the Colorado Army National Guard. It was one of the 29 original National Guard Observation Squadrons of the US Army National Guard formed before WWII. The unit initially was composed of eight officers and 50 enlisted men. The 120th OS was first equipped with Curtiss JN-4H Jennies in 1923. The H version was an upgraded variant of the famous JN-4D and some 929 were built with ailerons



The Curtiss JN-4H was the 120th Observation Squadron's first aircraft. However, the high altitudes near Denver were too much for its limited performance.

on both wings and greater power and reliability from a Hispano-Suiza V-8. However, these aircraft proved to be too fragile and underpowered for service in the mountain foothills and at the mile-high elevations surrounding Denver.

After one year, the unit moved to Lowry Field. This was a newly-built facility named in honor of 2nd Lt. Francis B. Lowry who was shot down and killed while on a photo recon mission near Crepion, France, during 1918. The Curtiss JN-4s were soon replaced with a long line of aircraft that included the BT-1, PT-1, O-2H, O-17, O-19, O-38, and O-47. Mobilization for WWII took place on 6 January 1941, some eleven months before the attack

on Pearl Harbor. At that time, the 120th had 19 officers and 116 enlisted men. They moved to Biggs Field in Texas, taking their O-38s and O-47s with them before being absorbed into the USAAF and newer aircraft. With the end of the war there were huge cuts in the USAAF and other services imposed by Pres. Harry S. Truman that allowed the American military to drastically shrink. On 24 May 1946, and following in the original concept of the citizen soldier, the USAAF allocated inactive unit designations to the National Guard Bureau for the formation of a new Air Force National Guard. These unit designations were allotted and transferred to various State National Guard Bureaus to



The 120th Observation Squadron transitioning from the Thomas-Morse O-19 biplane to the North American O-47 at Lowry Field.

The author and the specially-painted F-16C+ highlight the 100th anniversary of the Colorado Air National Guard.