

Brief History of the Minnesota Air National Guard and the 133rd Airlift Wing

Founding of the Minnesota Air National Guard

Ninety years ago, at a restaurant on Wabasha Street in Saint Paul, three men met to discuss starting a flying unit in the land of 10,000 lakes. Although it was well before the days of air superiority and the development of air-land battle tactics, they knew that aircraft would one day be an important part of military operations. These men - Lt. Col. William Garis, then Assistant Adjutant General of Minnesota, T. Glenn Harrison, a reporter for the Saint Paul Daily News, and Ray S. Miller, a World War I pilot - were important catalysts in the birth of the Air National Guard in the United States.

Early in 1920, the Militia Bureau (known today as the National Guard Bureau) and the Air Service (which became the Army Air Corps in 1926) agreed upon and announced a plan for organizing National Guard aero units. That news prompted the meeting between Garis, Harrison and Miller. When the trio stood to shake hands three hours later, the idea for Minnesota's first Air National Guard flying unit was well on its way to reality. Little did they know their actions that day would help change the traditional role of the National Guard for generations to come.

With the blessing of Brigadier General W. F. Rhinow, the Adjutant General of Minnesota, the three men formed the 109th Aero Squadron. At their first organizational meeting in July 1920, Miller became a captain and commanding officer of the squadron, and Harrison a first lieutenant and the 109th adjutant.

Shortly after that first unit "formation", General Rhinow approved the rental of a Curtis Oriole biplane for a flight from Saint Paul to Washington, D.C., where he, Miller and Garis planned to meet with key military leaders concerning the formation of a federal Air National Guard. They knew they were facing an uphill battle because military leaders were still skeptical about the utility of aircraft in battle. On September 26, 1920, Miller flew General Rhinow and Garis on a 1,600 mile, eight day trek to the nation's capital. Their goal was to convince the Militia Bureau of the need to form an Air National Guard.

On October 2, they landed the Oriole at Bolling Field in Washington. As luck would have it, they soon crossed paths with Brigadier General William "Billy" Mitchell, who was serving as assistant chief of the Air Service.

"Trips through the air from such a distance as Saint Paul to Washington, D.C., were just not done," Miller recalled. "But we made it without incident and when we walked into the Militia Bureau office, all in uniform, there were some surprised expressions on their faces."

Miller said General Mitchell asked him where he had gotten his wings. "I earned them at Love Field, sir," I replied, "that broke the ice and we told him all about our ideas."

General Mitchell wanted to know by what authority the new air unit had been formed and who was in it. Miller admitted the 109th lacked federal recognition, but went on to explain that the unit's personnel included World War I pilots, mechanics and ground officers who were spending

their own time and money in the aerial venture. After hearing this, General Mitchell pledged his support.

The Minnesota delegation spent three days in Washington, making several official visits and enthusiastically selling their concept of an Air National Guard. The military leaders who listened expressed interest and pledged support for such an organization. As a result, the unit received federal recognition on January 17, 1921 as the 109th Observation Squadron. The 109th was the first Air National Guard unit to receive federal recognition following World War I.

To receive Army Air Service aircraft, however, the 109th would have to provide suitable hangar space. As a location, the state of Minnesota selected Speedway Field, site of the present International Airport. There the State built three new hangars which were completed in February 1922. The squadron moved from its temporary offices in the St. Paul Armory to receive nine new JN-6H "Jennys", in 1923. Soon after, the field was officially dedicated Wold-Chamberlain Field to honor two Minnesota Air Service pilots who lost their lives in the service of their country during the first World War.

Missions and Aircraft

As a National Guard reserve unit of the United States Army, the Minnesota Air National Guard 109th Observation Squadron flew a variety of observation aircraft in the 1920s, 1930s, through their first call to federal service in 1941. In 1942, the activated unit was dispersed and members were assigned to active service flying. The unit reformed as the 109th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron flying the British Spitfire and later the P-51. Post World War II saw the formation of the 109th Fighter Squadron and a move to the air defense mission.

As a National Guard reserve unit of the United States Air Force, formed from the Army Air Corps in 1947, the principal unit reorganized in 1952 under the "wing-based" concept, and the 109th became a subordinate unit under the parent 133rd Airlift Wing, commanded by Brig Gen Ray S. Miller.

In the 1950s and early 1960s both Minnesota Air National Guard flying units, the 179th Fighter Interceptor Squadron - Duluth, and 109th Fighter Interceptor Squadron - Minneapolis were providing active air defense commitments with 24 hour alert status. The 109th flew F-89s and 179th flew F-94Cs. In earlier years both units flew P-51s. In later years, the 179th in Duluth took on a more active air defense role flying F89Js, F-101s, F-102s, and then F-4s, while the 109th in Minneapolis went from F-89s to the C-97 and a new airlift transport mission. Today the 148th Fighter Wing in Duluth continues the air intercept role flying the F-16. The 1950 through 1960 vintage aircraft are on display at the Minnesota Air Guard Museum in Minneapolis.

"Deke" Slayton, Chief Astronaut, was a member of the Minnesota Air Guard and the 109th Fighter Squadron. The Minnesota Air National Guard's 109th Airlift Squadron, part of the 133rd Airlift Wing, traces its roots to this earlier unit and mission.

In 1971, the 133rd's aging C-97s were replaced with C-130s. New tactical airlift capabilities assured that the 133rd would be busy throughout the 70s. In fact, in March 1973, the unit set a

new flying record for all C-130 equipped Air Guard and Reserve units by completing more than 491 hours in one month's time. What made the record so outstanding was that the 133rd amassed its total with only four aircraft, while the previous record holder used eight aircraft.

In the fall of 1996 the unit began receiving eight new C-130H3 aircraft. Today, the 133rd Airlift Wing continues flying the C-130H3 aircraft in accomplishing both its Federal and State missions.

Minnesota Air National Guard units have served in virtually every major conflict since its earliest days, including World War II, Korea, the Berlin Airlift, Vietnam, and Desert Shield and Desert Storm. More than three hundred members served in the Gulf War.

The 133rd Airlift Wing has also participated in and supported every major contingency in recent history, including Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom and New Dawn and has supported many other minor contingencies, including Operation Shining Hope.

Since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the 133rd Airlift Wing has cumulatively deployed over 5,600 Airmen to 35 countries in support of the Global War on Terror.

Domestically, the Wing has deployed Airmen and equipment in support of: Homeland Security after Sept. 11, crisis relief efforts after the Gulf Coast Hurricanes of 2005 and 2008, the I-35W bridge collapse in 2007, multiple Minnesota floods and many others.

The 133rd Airlift Wing Today

The 133rd Airlift Wing continues a rich tradition of service and excellence. The Wing consistently demonstrates the highest levels of patriotism and professionalism in service to the state and nation.

In recognition of this high-level of performance, the Air Force has eight times awarded the Wing the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award (AFOUA) for exceptionally meritorious service (1987, 1992, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2007 and 2010.) The AFOUA is awarded to only the top ten percent of Air Force units nationwide.

In addition to the airlift and direct airlift support missions, 133rd Airlift Wing members perform a variety of Air Force missions including aeromedical evacuation, logistics planning and support, civil engineering, and cyber communications support.

The 133rd Airlift Wing maintains a reputation as the premier C-130 unit in the Air National Guard, demonstrating an unmatched record of performance and sustained excellence throughout the years.

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