

‘Contact!’ National Guard’s journey into aviation began with some pushing and pulling



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Air National Guard History

The National Guard served as a hotbed of early, grassroots aviation. Key individuals persevered despite a lack of funding and interest by military leadership.

Like the Army, that enthusiasm had been foreshadowed by ballooning. In April 1908, a group of Guard enthusiasts had organized an “aeronautical corps” in New York City to learn ballooning, but there is no evidence that they ever actually ascended in those devices. In 1910, unit members raised \$500 privately to buy their first aircraft. The investment disappeared when the plane crashed on takeoff during maneuvers that same year.

There were several other early efforts to form Guard aero units in various states by civilian flyers, businessmen and Guardsmen. They were as interested in promoting the general development of American aviation as they were in establishing Guard aviation. The Missouri Guard established a small aero detachment in 1909. California established an aeronautical detachment in its 7th Coast Artillery Company March 12, 1911. Eugene Ely, the first man to launch an aircraft from the deck of a warship, was the detachment’s first private and the first pilot to be commissioned in that state.

Several states had established small aviation branches within their National Guard organizations by 1916. Aside from New York, none were able to provide those fledgling air organizations with anything approaching adequate financial support.

Nebraska’s experience was apparently typical. The state’s experiment with military aviation began in 1913 when members of its signal corps branch assembled a Curtiss Model D biplane. The plane probably participated in the branch’s annual encampment that year but there was no official recognition of aviation’s existence in the Nebraska Guard. Formal acknowledgement came on July 15, 1915, when the state issued an order organizing its aviation corps. Capt. Castle W. Schaffer was assigned as its chief. A little later, he was joined by Ralph E. McMillen, a qualified pilot. Each of the officers provided their own airplane. To raise money for the aviation branch, the governor “decided that the aviators should give exhibitions at county fairs and other public gatherings to supplement the very small funds that could be made available from the state.”

The aviators operated with either of the

state’s two infantry regiments as training requirements dictated. Apparently, most of Schaffer’s flights were visual reconnaissance missions conducted in direct support of the infantry. In July, Edgar Bagnell, a private in the Guard, was commissioned a first lieutenant in the flying organization. Schaffer apparently gave up flying after a crash landing during the summer of 1915. Bagnell was mustered into federal service in 1916. McMillen was killed when his airplane crashed during an exhibition flight in September 1916. His death marked the effective end of Nebraska’s military aviation experiment.

The Army had begun sending Guardsmen to flight school in late 1915. In August 1916, Congress appropriated \$13.88 million for military aviation. The legislation also mandated that flight training would be provided to one Guardsman from each state. That initiative had been promoted by Reuben Fleet, a prosperous businessman, member of the Washington state legislature and a Guardsman. While a legislator, he had sponsored a bill to require Washington to spend \$250,000 on Guard aviation, far more than the federal government had appropriated in any one year up to that point. Although Fleet’s appropriation bill ultimately died in the state legislature, he was convinced that his initiative had emboldened the Army to take a more aggressive stance in lobbying for aviation funds on Capitol Hill.

In 1917, Fleet was one of 11 Guardsmen selected for flight training. He transferred into the Army and won his wings after the United States entered World War I. During the war, he helped manage the production and procurement of Army aircraft in Washington. Fleet was selected to organize the nation’s first airmail service in May 1918.

Raynal Cawthorne Bolling, for which an air force base is named, played a key role in the formative years of National Guard aviation. The New York Guardsman was the chief attorney for the U.S. Steel Corporation. In 1915, he began taking flying lessons and attended a military training camp for businessmen at Plattsburg, N.Y. After returning from Plattsburg, he and several other prominent New Yorkers began to organize a National Guard aero company with the support of Maj. Gen. John F. O’Ryan, the state’s adjutant general. Aided

by an initial \$12,500 gift from the Aero Club of New York City and other private contributions, the fledgling Guard aviators rented two aircraft and financed the training of student pilots at private flying schools. On Nov. 1, 1915, Bolling organized and was appointed commander of the first real Guard aviation unit, the 1st Aero Company, New York National Guard.

Bolling’s air unit was called into federal service on July 13, 1916, during the crisis with Mexico precipitated by Pancho Villa’s raid on Columbus, N.M. In September, they were augmented by the 2nd Aero Company of the New York Guard from Buffalo plus 10 officers from other states. The 2nd Aero Co. had been organized in 1916. Following Villa’s raid, President

Woodrow Wilson mobilized the entire National Guard and dispatched most of it to the Mexican border.

The 1st Aero Co. never saw the Mexican border. Instead, it trained at Mineola, N.Y. For the first five weeks at camp, all of its expenses for equipment maintenance and operation were paid by the Aero Club. The Army finally began to pay those bills on Aug. 1, 1916. The company was released from federal service on Nov. 2, 1916 and

disbanded on May 12, 1917. Bolling was disillusioned by the whole experience at Mineola. He doubted that aviation could ever be a success in the Guard because it was costly and highly technical. There was no shortage of volunteers to learn flying. But Bolling concluded that Guard aero units would never attract enough qualified enlisted mechanics. Bolling and virtually all of the members of the 1st Aero Co. left the Guard. They joined the Army Signal Corps Reserve and founded the 1st Aero Reserve Squadron in May 1917 which was sent to France in August 1917. Bolling’s skepticism was shared by the acting chief of the Militia Bureau, Col. G.W. McIver, a regular Army officer. The War Department decided Guard aviation units would not be activated during World War I. Instead, those organizations were disbanded and their members were encouraged to volunteer for active duty as individuals.

Those early years were the opening chapter of the long and difficult struggle by National Guard aviation to win the right to fight as well-equipped and properly-trained units of America’s armed forces. 1



Bolling

It happened in July

Selected entries from the National Guard’s 365-day event calendar found at www.ngb.army.mil

July 2, 1926

WASHINGTON — Congress enacts a bill that establishes the U.S. Army Air Corps and places it in control of all Army aviation (including Guard) activities.

July 3, 1863

GETTYSBURG, Pa. — “Pickett’s Charge” marks the climax of this three-day battle as Confederate forces reach their “High Water Mark” on the Union lines only to be repulsed and forced to withdraw. Guard units are fighting on both sides. The Southerners retreat back into Virginia in the following days, never to seriously threaten northern territory again.

July 5, 1952

“SMOKE VALLEY,” South Korea — Kentucky’s 623rd Field Artillery Battalion, armed with 18, 155mm towed howitzers, moves into this area in support of X Corps in holding operations against communist Chinese assaults. During this period, it will earn a Republic of Korea Unit Citation for its fire support of South Korean troops in repelling an enemy assault.

July 29, 1970

KORAT ROYAL THAI AIR BASE, Thailand — Volunteers of Pennsylvania’s 193rd Tactical Electronic Warfare Group begin their secret mission of propaganda broadcasts over enemy-held territory. During the 1965 operation of the U.S. military in quelling unrest in the Dominican Republic, the Defense Department decided it needed some way to communicate by AM radio with the populace our intentions and instructions to help reduce needless deaths. With the Vietnam War costing billions of dollars already, the Air Force said it could not organize such a specialized unit on a full-time basis. Maj. Gen. Winston Wilson, the chief of the National Guard Bureau, offered the 193rd to perform this mission.