

120 FIGHTER WING



MISSION

LINEAGE

120 Fighter Group (Air Defense) was activated, 16 Apr 1956
Redesignated 120 Fighter Interceptor Group, 1 Oct 1972
Redesignated 120 Fighter Group
Redesignated 120 Fighter Wing, 1 Oct 1995

STATIONS

Great Falls, MT

ASSIGNMENTS

Air Defense Command

WEAPON SYSTEMS

Mission Aircraft

Support Aircraft

C-47
C-54, 1964
T-29, 1973
U-3, 1970
C-131, 1975
C-130, 1986
C-26, 1992
VT-29

COMMANDERS

LTC Robert B. Sherman
LTC Emmett. J. Whalen
Col James W. Higgins

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

EMBLEM



Per bend Azure and Celeste, in bend a stylized aircraft Argent, between in chief a configuration of a ringed planet Or in the midst of eight stars of the Third and in base a conventionalized landscape consisting of a Yellow sun rising behind the dexter peak of two snow-topped Green mountains beneath a White cloud with Blue outlines, issuing from the side of the shield and precipitating Blue rain, all above a Light Blue river in a Yellow plain, all within a diminished bordure of the Fourth. Ultramarine blue and Air Force yellow are the Air Force colors. Blue alludes to the sky, the primary theater of Air Force operations. Yellow refers to the sun and the excellence required of Air Force personnel. The shield's divided background is emblematic of the Wing's mission to be ready at all times to defend the nation against aggressors, both day and night. The missile symbolizes the unit's interception capabilities. The snow-capped mountains, rising sun, prairie and river represent the Wing's home state while the rain cloud and sun allude to the unit's ability to perform in all weather.

An organizational insignia for the 120th was approved in May 1958 by the Air Force Heraldry Office. The original submission had been previously rejected as having too many colors. Designed by Clifford A. Poindexter of Group Headquarters, the insignia's snowcapped mountains, rising sun, prairie, and river represent an adaptation of the Montana State Seal, while the rain cloud signifies the 120th's all weather capability. The same is true of the night

and day portrayal separated by the conceptual fighter. The space potential of the air defense mission is shown by the stars and planets. Displayed in the lower scroll is the unit's motto, "Seek, Contact, Destroy." According to heraldry, once a unit emblem is approved, it remains with the unit as long as the organization exists; the only alterations allowed are in the scroll wording.

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

On April 16, 1956, the unit was redesignated the 120th Fighter Group (Air Defense) and the 186th Fighter Squadron remained as the group's flying squadron. By the end of 1956 the unit had reached a strength of 550 men and with a new authorization to go to 1,000 people, recruiting became a permanent concern. About 150 people were recruited during 1957 and the group earned its first National Flying Safety Award.

25 Jan 1962, when the group's C-47 crashed into a mountain just outside of Wolf Creek, MT during a severe windstorm. Killed in that accident were Montana Governor Donald G. Nutter; his executive secretary, Dennis Gorden; State Agricultural Commissioner Edward Wren; guardsmen Maj Joseph R. Devine, Maj Clifford E. Hanson, and Crew Chief MSgt Charles "Chico" Ballard. The "Gooney Bird" had been dispatched from Great Falls to pick up the governor and his staff in Helena and fly them to Cut Bank for a speaking engagement. Radio transmissions from the C-47 indicated that the governor wanted to take a closer look at the projected new highway route and that several passes would be flown over the Wolf Creek area. Such a flight was not unusual and was well within the operational limits of the C-47.

On one pass the aircraft's right wing separated in flight and the aircraft slammed into a mountain. When the aircraft had not arrived in Cut Bank by its expected arrival time and radio contact could not be established, a search was begun. Shortly before the search had gotten underway the Lewis and Clark County Sheriff's office received a call from two loggers who had been working north of Wolf Creek. They reported that a plane had crashed, that it was burning and had set trees in the area on fire.

They went to the crash site, located four bodies, and removed them from the smoldering wreckage. Two sheriff's deputies and a local rancher were next on the scene. Crews from the 120th and Malmstrom AFB arrived later to begin the investigation and to remove aircraft debris. The next day a member of the 120th's team found the C-47's right wing some 1.25 miles from the crash site. The wing was only superficially damaged, leading investigators to suspect that the wing was torn off by high winds and turbulence. Three months afterwards the investigating team announced that the crash was caused by structural failure in the wing due to metal fatigue.

June 1964. To protect Great Falls, Montana against flooding, 375 Air Guardsmen from the 120th Fighter Group assisted in sandbagging, evacuating threatened areas, patrolling, providing fixed and mobile communications, fire protection, and ground transportation. The unit's C-47

mission support aircraft flew 33 missions delivering emergency supplies and personnel.

As the year progressed the group received its full complement of F-102's. Aircraft were elevated to unit maintenance engineers) we could count on getting where we were going without too much fanfare." Hommas said he and his crew had a lot of fun with the C-54 because for one thing it was so old and for another, it was so well cared for and sharp looking.

"We flew to Calgary one time with a load of maintenance guys and parts to fix a '6 that broke during an exercise up there," Hommas recalled, "and when we landed I shut down three of the engines and was taxiing on just one. The tower controller said something about what a great looking ship we had and then he asked me why we Yanks were taxiing on one engine." Being quick on the draw, Hommas jokingly replied, " Well, because if I shut down all four of 'ern, we couldn't taxi at all."

Matchett remembered a trip where then Montana Governor Forrest Anderson and staff were along enroute to a governor's conference in Washington D.C. Not long after takeoff one engine began spewing out quite a bit more oil than was normal so we made a precautionary landing somewhere in one of the Dakotas, he said, and we taxied over to the local guard base looking for help. Continuing, Matchett told of "finding no one home" since it was a Sunday. "So we unloaded our tool boxes, and a step ladder and robbed a couple of oil lines off one of their airplanes sitting on the ramp. bent diem as needed. put 'em on, and went merrily on our way." Matchett added that they left a note attached to the cannibalized plane and called them the next day to make sure nobody tried to fly the aircraft from which they had "borrowed" the parts.

Desert Storm saw 72 of its members activated in support of the effort, all of them providing backfill at U.S. bases. The 120th Clinic ran the 842nd Strategic Hospital at Grand Forks AFB for 56 days starting on 8 February 1991.

28 Feb the group's C-130B was replaced with a brand new C-26B. That airplane became just the second "new" airplane ever assigned to the group. While the crew of the C-26 were assigned to the 120 FIG, maintenance was performed under a USAF contract by civilians.

The Montana Air National Guard's 120th Fighter Wing has received the first of the F-15s slated to replace its F-16s, courtesy of BRAC 2005. According to an Aug. 16 report from the Great Falls Tribune, the first F-15s were flown in by members of the losing unit, the Missouri ANG's 131st Bomb Wing (formerly 131st FW), one of whom, Lt. Col. Darrin Barritt, said, "It's been my life for 21 years; it's a great machine." Although the F-15s are older than the F-16s the 131st FW has given up, at least one of the wing's aircraft maintainers, SSgt. Doug LaPierre, is "ecstatic," he said. LaPierre has worked on both fighters and told the newspaper that he likes the "more hands-on work" provided by the F-15s, which don't have the F-16's computer-assisted maintenance. "They're kind of a dinosaur in the fighter aircraft world," said LaPierre.

The Montana Air National Guard's 120th Fighter Wing at Great Falls has a spokesman talking with area residents, trying to respond to their concerns about the unit's switch from F-16s to F-15s. The Great Falls Tribune reports that the word is more noise, but not significantly more. The arrival of the first F-15s is about a year off, but apparently area residents are voicing their concerns now that the two-engine F-15 will make twice the noise of the single-engine F-16. Not so, says Maj. Rick Anderson, an ANG public affairs officer. He says, "The F-15 will be somewhat louder, but no where near twice as noisy. "

The 120th Fighter Wing of the Montana Air National Guard conducted its first F-15 sortie late last week, reports KRTV news. The Great Falls-based Air Guard unit began replacing its F-16s with F-15s, courtesy of BRAC 2005, last year and expects to have all its Eagles some time next year. (The wing painted its tail flash on the first of its F-15s in December.) Unit pilots are spending about five months making the transition from the smaller air-to-ground F-16s to the larger air-to-air F-15s. According to the last BRAC decisions, the 120th FW is to have a complement of 15 Eagles, but the Montana Congressional delegation had been working to increase that number. The lawmakers also wanted secure an associate mission for the wing, in which it would train active-duty airmen about F-15 maintenance.

The Montana Air National Guard's 120th Airlift Wing flew its first C-130 sortie on Wednesday, following the unit's conversion from the F-15 fighter, wing officials announced on Facebook. The last F-15C from the former 120th Fighter Wing departed Great Falls for the California ANG's 144th FW in Fresno last October, according to the unit newsletter. The redesignated 120th AW's first C-130H arrived in March and its full complement of seven airlifters is slated to arrive by June, reported Great Falls KRTV. C-130 maintenance and support personnel trained with the Wyoming ANG over the past few months, according to a release. Montana pilots cross trained to the C-130 at Little Rock AFB, Ark., and the unit plans to begin routine flight operations in June. The unit flew fighters for 66 years before changing to the airlift mission. 2014

Malmstrom AFB, Mont., recently opened a new C-130 cargo drop zone to provide the Montana Air National Guard's 120th Airlift Wing a nearby, unrestricted area for airdrop training. The unit was restricted to dropping lightweight bundles over its home base at Great Falls International Airport due to safety reasons, forcing C-130s to fly further afield to train with operationally representative pallet loads. "The new drop zone will aid with training flight crews as the Montana ANG unit continues its conversion to the C-130 Hercules transport aircraft mission, and is a cost-saving alternative to existing drop zones located near Helena and Townsend," officials stated in a release. The new drop zone, located adjacent to Malmstrom's closed runway, will not interfere with the base's UH-1N helicopter operations and will ultimately "save man hours, equipment, wear and tear," and keep support personnel off dangerous winter roads. The unit flew its first C-130 sortie after converting from the F-15C/D last June. 2015

Air National Guardsmen from the 120th and 182nd Airlift Wings departed for home this week following a four-month deployment at an undisclosed location in Southwest Asia. During their deployment, the Airmen were assigned to the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing, where they successfully delivered cargo downrange at a record-breaking pace in support of Operation

Inherent Resolve, the coalition mission aimed at defeating ISIS. Their mission while deployed were flying and maintaining multiple C-130H Hercules aircraft. Some of the records they broke included the most hours flown since October 2012 and most passengers moved in recorded history from their location. This was accomplished by a team of citizen Airmen working tirelessly to complete the mission.

“The guys I have worked with here are outstanding,” said Lt. Col. Joseph Rudebeck, a 737th Expeditionary Airlift Squadron pilot, deployed from the 182nd Airlift Wing. “Their level of professionalism and dedication is second to none.” In order to keep the C-130 mission fully functional and off the ground, knowledgeable maintenance Airmen worked day and night to identify and fix potential issues. Airman 1st Class John Rayyan, a 386th Expeditionary Aircraft Maintenance Squadron aircraft environmental electrician, deployed from the 182nd AW, did his part to make sure the aircraft was working properly. “Without the components the aircraft wouldn’t be able to fly, so if anything goes bad with those components, I am there to fix it,” said Rayyan.

This team also achieved their unit’s best mission completion rate since 2015. This was accomplished through close integration between the aircrew and the Aircraft Maintenance Unit. Pilots like Rudebeck recognized the importance of working alongside these maintainers. “Those guys are spot on and always have a spare jet ready for us to go so we can still get the mission off on time,” said Rudebeck. The flying missions often brought the aircraft to rough environments. This resulted in a need for constant upkeep of the C-130s. “These planes take a beating and there is always maintenance that goes along with it,” said Rudebeck. “The maintenance guys are challenged in ways they are not challenged at home station.” “One that sticks out the best is our hours flown,” said Tech. Sgt. Taylor Thoroughman, a 386th EAMXS crew chief, deployed from the 120th AW. “Not only are we not breaking the aircraft, but when they do break we are getting them back fully mission capable within the allotted time they give us.” These Airmen will go back home knowing they did their part in sending ammunition, food, personnel and other necessary cargo downrange in the fight against ISIS.

Air Force Unit Histories

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Sources

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