

History of the Nevada Air National Guard

Originally by, Tech. Sgt. Emerson Marcus, State Historian (updated 1/4/2023)

The Nevada Air National Guard's history dates back nearly 75 years, predominantly in northern Nevada, and is best explained through its mission sets: fighter (1948-1961), piloted reconnaissance (1961-1995) and its modern era with tactical airlift and unmanned reconnaissance (1996-present).

Throughout, the Nevada Air National Guard earned international esteem, especially in aerial reconnaissance competitions in the late-1970s and 1980s, along with its Persian Gulf deployment in 1991 and most recently its entrance last year into a nationwide, wildland firefighting mission with the U.S. Forest Service.

In 1980, an *Airman Magazine* article dubbed the then-152nd Reconnaissance Group, the “High Rollers of Reno,”¹ given its history of success — and the nickname remains today, most noticeably adorned on the tail flash of its eight C-130 aircraft.

While most Airmen in the Nevada Air National Guard fall under the 152nd Airlift Wing, Nevada Air National Guard State Headquarters oversees its operations. It also oversees the 152nd Intelligence Squadron and the 232nd Operations Squadron, each dating their history to 1994 and 2007, respectively.

The Fighter Era (1948-1961)

The National Security Act of 1947 allowed for the creation of the 192nd Fighter Squadron at the Stead Army Air Base. The unit officially gained federal recognition on April 12, 1948 flying **B-26 and P-51 aircraft**. Community events, donations and support from congressmen such as U.S. Sen. Pat McCarran, D-Nev., helped fund the new Nevada Air Guard unit. Early domestic operations included humanitarian aid missions in the winter of 1950, dropping supplies to stranded farmers and miners following western U.S. snowstorms.²

On March 1, 1951, the unit's 36 officers and 305 enlisted airmen activated for federal service in the Korean War. During its 21-month activation, the 192nd's aircrew served in Texas, Missouri, Puerto Rico, Iceland and some flew combat missions over North Korea. One of the pilots, 1st Lt. Frank Salazar, flew multiple missions for the 45th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron in South Korea. On Dec. 31, 1951, Salazar's P-51 was shot down during an air interdiction mission over North Korea. Initially listed as missing in action, the U.S. Air Force recognized him as deceased two years later.³

In the years following its return from active duty, the Nevada Air Guard entered several lease agreements with the city of Reno, which included Hubbard Field in southeast Reno, today home of the Reno-Tahoe International Airport. By then, U.S. Air Force Strategic Air Command took control of the base in Stead. The National Guard Bureau spent more than \$2 million on airfield

¹ Airman, “The High Rollers of Reno: Nevada ANG ‘recce’ pilots are accustomed to winning,” Volume XXIX, No. 9, September 1980, page 44.

² “Plane Drops Food to Hungry Miners,” Nevada State Journal, January 15, 1950

³ “Nevada Air Guard marks 50 years of flight duty,” Reno Gazette-Journal, April 3, 1998

improvements, a 2,000-foot runway extension and shared in future maintenance costs for a 26-year, 29-acre lease and joint-use agreement.⁴ Those agreements were supplemented in 1955, extending the lease to 2054 and doubling the acreage.⁵ The 152nd Airlift Wing and the 152nd Intelligence Squadron, with their 1,100 airmen, remain stationed there today.

In 1955, the 192nd re-designated from a fighter-bomber squadron to a fighter-interceptor squadron flying the F-86 and T-33 jets. The Nevada Air Guard maintained two aircraft on 24-hour alert for coastal defense flights.⁶

The Piloted Reconnaissance Era (1961-1995)

In 1961, the Nevada Air National Guard completed a major mission conversion with fighter bomber aircraft to aerial reconnaissance with the **RB-57 Canberra**. The unit experienced early success with the new aircraft and won the Air Force Association's Earl T. Ricks Memorial trophy for outstanding professionalism in 1963. It was the first of many reconnaissance awards and was instrumental in the unit earning an Air Force Outstanding Unit Award that year.⁷

In short time, the re-designated 152nd Tactical Reconnaissance Group received **RF-101 "Voodoo"** aircraft, the unit's first supersonic aircraft. The 101 could reach speeds in excess of 1,200 mph. The aircraft was outfitted with aerial cameras used for photographing assigned targets in support of the Tactical Air Command mission.⁸

On Jan. 26, 1968, all elements of the Nevada Air National Guard, excluding State Headquarters, were called into active duty during the Pueblo Crisis. President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered the call-up in response to the North Korean capture of the USS Pueblo, a naval intelligence vessel. While no direct military retaliation was initiated, more than 600 Nevada Air Guardsmen were activated on one-day notice for service in South Korea and various places around the U.S. and the world during the military build-up, which came when the president's popularity had diminished and the nation's appetite for activity overseas waned as Vietnam War protests at home grew. The deployment left the community without firefighters, journalists, police officers and many in the business community. While Nevada airmen answered the nation's call, newspaper editorials said the sudden deployment had "shaken up the community."⁹ Nevada airmen returned home from the deployment by late spring 1969.¹⁰

During the activation, the U.S. Air Force allowed for the release of one Nevada Airman, Senior Master Sgt. Gerald L. Larson, then-stationed in Korea, as a special recruiter with the task of enlisting 120 airmen. Larson was released Feb. 26, 1969 with a deadline of enlisting additional airmen before the end of the active duty tour on June 9, 1969. The move was in anticipation of a mass exodus of airmen from the Nevada Air National Guard, given the unpopularity of the activation. Larson enlisted the personnel within the time allotted, a herculean effort that helped

⁴ "Air Guard Hangar to be dedicated," Reno Evening Gazette, March 20, 1956

⁵ "History of Nevada Air National Guard Base Development," Binder No. 9, Facilities History, 152nd AW historical files

⁶ 1956 Biennial Report, State Printing Office, Carson City, Nevada, 27

⁷ "Silver Anniversary, 1948-1973," Nevada Air National Guard, 8

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ "Nevadans Given a Jolt as Air Guard is Called," Nevada State Journal, Jan. 26, 1968.

¹⁰ "Here Come Reno's Guardsmen...They're Home!" Nevada State Journal, May 26, 1969.

save the Nevada Air National Guard during one of the bleakest moments in the organization's history.¹¹

The Nevada Air National Guard rebounded in the post-Vietnam Era with a new jet — **the RF-4C** — and a commitment to becoming one of the best reconnaissance units in the nation. With Col. Wayne Adams as commander of the then-152nd Reconnaissance Group, the Reno unit gained national recognition as the titleholder in the biennial Photo Finish competition, winning best overall aerial reconnaissance unit among seven Air National Guard and two active duty units. It also had the best overall photo interpretation team. In 1980, *Airman Magazine* declared the “High Rollers of Reno” were “best at what they do” — aerial reconnaissance.¹² The unit went on to win Reconnaissance Air Meet championships in 1986 and 1990.¹³

During the 1980s, training missions usually occurred six days a week with F-4 pilots executing low-altitude, high-speed reconnaissance missions in the day and low-altitude night missions on terrain-following radar at night, soaring around the western U.S. and sometimes over the Pacific Ocean.¹⁴

In December 1991, 150 men and women were activated during Operation Desert Storm. The unit deployed to Sheik Isa Air Base in Bahrain and were among the first aircrew to fly reconnaissance missions over Kuwait and Iraq at the onset of the war. During missions, Nevada Air Guard crews dodged anti-aircraft artillery and obtained photos of burning wellheads that had dumped oil into the Persian Gulf. They also spotted strategic targets and conducted bomb damage assessments on the first morning of the war. Thirteen airmen of the unit received the Distinguished Flying Cross. The 152nd completed 265 sorties in 662 flight hours. Members of the unit were deactivated April 8, 1991.¹⁵

The Persian Gulf War and the homecoming many received upon their return was in many ways a rebuke of the anti-war protests of the Vietnam War. Parades greeted the returning service members with an outpouring of patriotism. This was certainly the case in Reno.¹⁶

However, while community support reached an all-time high following the deployment, the unit faced serious obstacles. McDonnell Douglas ended production of the F-4 in 1985. Additionally, following the Gulf War, new technology and unmanned aircraft for tactical reconnaissance emerged. It became inevitable that the 152nd Reconnaissance Group would need to seek a new mission to save the Nevada Air National Guard.

The Modern Era: Tactical Airlift and Unmanned Reconnaissance (1996-present)

While serving as the chairman of the Western Long Range Planning Committee, Brig. Gen. John Molini, the Nevada Air National Guard chief of staff, said he heard in advance that all manned

¹¹ “Silver Anniversary, 1948-1973,” Nevada Air National Guard, 9

¹² Airman, “The High Rollers of Reno: Nevada ANG ‘recce’ pilots are accustomed to winning,” Volume XXIX, No. 9, September 1980, page 44.

¹³ 1991 Biennial Report, State Printing Office, Carson City, Nevada, 36

¹⁴ “From jets to Hercs: 152nd leadership fought 20 years ago to maintain ‘High Roller culture’” Nevada National Guard Joint Force Headquarters (website) <http://www.nv.ngb.army.mil/Nvng/index.cfm/public-affairs/news-releases/from-jets-to-hercs-152nd-leadership-fought-20-years-ago-to-maintain-high-roller-culture/>

¹⁵ “Remembers the Past, Preparing for the Future,” Nevada Air National Guard’s 50th anniversary yearbook, 69

¹⁶ “Hometown Heroes: Northern Nevadans return from the Persian Gulf,” Reno Gazette-Journal Commemorative Edition, May 3, 1991

reconnaissance aircraft were going to be retired. As a result, the Nevada Air National Guard had a few months head start on seeking a new flying mission. The decision initially hinged on several factors, and the option to remain a fighter unit was never off the table.¹⁷

The F-16 remained a popular option for many who wanted to keep fighter jets at the base. Leadership even discussed other options, such as moving the unit to southern Nevada. They eventually decided on **C-130** aircraft. Nevada's Adjutant General, Maj. Gen. Drennan "Tony" Clark, put it simply: "I was just very glad we still had a flying mission...especially here in Reno. I was willing to take anything as long as I could lobby to get new airplanes."¹⁸

On Sept. 27, 1995, the last four operational RF-4C reconnaissance jet aircraft in the U.S. military departed from the base in Reno in what was described as a "tear filled ceremony." The event included a photo session with one of the unit's Operation Desert Storm aircraft: tail No. 886. Today, that aircraft sits on display at the entrance gate to the Nevada Air National Guard Base in Reno.¹⁹

The airlift mission wasn't the only one beginning at the base at this time. In 1994, the 152nd Intelligence Squadron activated and combined the photo processing and interpretation facility functions of the 192nd Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron with the intelligence section of the 152nd Avionics Branch.²⁰

Additionally, they entered a new mission with C-130s before the aircraft arrived at the base: Pacer Coin. This three-year mission focused on counter drug and firefighting operations and allowed the unit to continue using its F-4 cameras on a roll-on, roll-off pallet connected on the back of a C-130. Pacer Coin also deployed to Aviano Air Base, Italy, in support of Bosnia Operations in 1997.²¹

In 1998, after the Pacer Coin mission ended, the 152nd Intel Squadron had already moved into the unmanned reconnaissance realm with the RQ-4A Global Hawk. It also continued new missions with the C-130, including Scathe View, which conducted aerial mapping and humanitarian relief operations following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Following terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001, the 152nd Intelligence Squadron was one of the first Nevada National Guard units activated, performing force protection and airbase defense around the world. Today, those activations continue for the Nevada Air National Guard's unmanned reconnaissance units, which now includes the 232nd Operations Squadron at Creech Air Force Base in Indian Springs.²²

In the Post-9/11 Era, the 152nd Airlift Wing also saw its operations temps greatly increase, supporting Operations Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom and Noble Eagle. This deployment cycle has increasingly become the standard for the Wing during the Global War on Terrorism.²³

¹⁷ Hercs to Jets

¹⁸ *Ibid*

¹⁹ *Ibid*

²⁰ "History of the 152nd Intelligence Squadron," Nevada National Guard Historical Office, 2016

²¹ *Ibid*

²² *Ibid*

²³ 2017 Biennial Report, State Printing Office, Carson City, Nevada, 6

In addition to its overseas contingencies — cargo and personnel transportation — the National Guard Bureau announced April 2016 that the 152nd Airlift Wing would replace the 145th Airlift Wing, North Carolina Air National Guard, as one of four military C-130 units nationwide flying the Modular Airborne Fire Fighting System in support of the U.S. Forest Service. The U.S. Forest Service's large MAFFS equipment — rolled into the back of a C-130 aircraft — can drop up to 3,000 gallons of water or fire retardant in six seconds through a nozzle on the rear left side of the plane.²⁴

Throughout its ups and downs over the past seven and a half decades, the Nevada Air National Guard has always maintained a close community tie in the Reno area, from its humble beginnings through the Pueblo activation to its welcome home parties after Desert Storm and the outpouring of support in the face of a potential Base Realignment Act closure in 2005. It's hard to imagine the Nevada Air National Guard without its community connection. Now, nearly three decades after its conversion to C-130 aircraft, the Nevada Air National Guard again looks positioned for another resurgence with an upgraded fleet and its new firefighting mission. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that resurgence coincides with the northern Nevada economic recovery following the Great Recession, as tech companies and businesses such as Google, Tesla, Apple, Switch and others move to the region.

²⁴ *Ibid*