

★★★ BIG SKY FLYER



Vol. XXXI, No. 2 - February 2009



{ INSIDE }



Service before self and a love for our flag, brought to you by the Honor Guard



Award winning Services Squadron sets the bar for the entire Air National Guard

Where Eagles Soar

The familiar tail flash
is back in the Big Sky

EXCELLENCE ★ INTEGRITY ★ SERVICE



Chief Master Sgt. Larry Seibel
120th Fighter Wing Command Chief

Command Chief bids Farewell

Stay safe, stay focused as you continue your mission

As I write my final article for the Big Sky Flyer as the 120th Fighter Wing Command Chief, I want to take this opportunity to thank all of you for your outstanding support you gave me in the last four and a half years. I also want to say goodbye and good luck in the future to each and every one of you and your families. Although I am retiring, you will always have a special place in my heart. As I reflect back over the last 31 years in the military, I can't help but think how lucky I am to have served in a world-class organization with world-class people in the Montana Air National Guard. I can't begin to tell you how very proud I am of each and every one of you for your outstanding accomplishments and your many contributions to this fine organization.

“Although I am retiring, you will always have a special place in my heart. As I reflect back over the last 31 years in the military, I can't help but think how lucky I am to have served in a world-class organization with world-class people in the Montana Air National Guard.”

What is on the horizon for the 120th Fighter Wing in the future? Since September 2008, we have been in a conversion status converting to the F-15. During this conversion, our main focus is to convert safely and efficiently. If there is one thing that will turn a good day into a nightmare, it is to have someone in the unit injured or killed because a corner was cut or a procedure was not properly executed. It is my opinion that the number one cause of safety mishaps is complacency. The definition of complacency is being self-satisfied and unaware of possible dangers. Complacency happens when someone has completed the same task hundreds of times and thinks they know how to do the procedure without following a checklist. Please, always stay vigilant of your surroundings, always look out for your Wingman and completely focus on executing the mission in a flawless and safely manner. What other challenges will the 120th Fighter Wing face in the future? Will the operations tempo increase or decrease? With both the Iraqi and Afghanistan wars not ending anytime soon, I am positively sure the operations tempo for the 120th Fighter Wing will not decrease. We are a nation at war and because of the continued war on terrorism we are expected as guardsmen and women to execute the mission safely and flawlessly with a part time force. When members of the Montana Air National Guard deploy, a tremendous amount of stress is inflicted upon them and their families. Again, I would ask each and every one of you to watch your Wingman for signs of stress and altered behavior. If you witness behavior that is not normal of a unit member please tell someone in your chain-of-command.

In closing, remember safety first, stay focused on the mission and take care of each other. Thank you for your service to your country and for what you do for the Montana Air National Guard. The 120th Fighter Wing is looked to as a world-class organization by the leaders of the Air Force and National Guard Bureau because of who each of you are and what you have done for this unit. Stay safe and it has been my honor to serve with you.



Lt. Col. James McComas walks out on the flight line to begin his preflight check of the F-15 prior to its first flight in the big sky of Montana.(U.S. Air Force Photo by Senior Master Sgt. Eric Peterson)

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Sortie Number One

The twin-engine, all-weather tactical fighter takes to the Big Sky.

Two sounds dominated the Montana Air National Guard last month as the first F-15 sortie took off: the thunder of the twin-engine tactical fighter, and the quiet “All right!” everyone felt inside as the Eagle whisked by and boldly announced that the 120th Fighter Wing is back in business.

The first rule of launching or flying an aircraft is to focus and remain focused on your task. With the concentration of a prize fighter, F-15 Pilot, Lt. Col. James McComas and F-15 Crew Chiefs, Tech. Sgts. Marty Kummer and Doug LaPierre weren't distracted by the cameras or by-standers. It was a comforting feeling watching these airmen perform their assigned pre-flight duties in unison knowing the ultimate role they play in this nation's defense.

All systems checked, chocks removed, salutes exchanged, and the Eagle began to taxi. “This means that we are officially switching gears from a training environment to an operational environment,” said Component Maintenance Flight Supervisor, Chief Master Sgt. Roy Hannah. “Not saying that we are experts because the learning in any weapon system happens everyday, but over time we will get more experience and more efficient.”

“The first sortie is a positive step towards our goal of being proficient and completely qualified on this new airframe,” said Tech. Sgt. Jeremy Marn. “The first sortie is a good indication that regular flying is closer to becoming reality.”

The MTANG has been relatively void of any military jet noise for nearly six months, and the event was a welcome moment to announce that we are back. Thousands of man-hours were performed in the Maintenance Group to ensure a safe and reliable mission.

The F-15, on average, is about ten years older, than its cousin the F-16. Maintaining the F-15 has its own set of challenges not found on the F-16. “The aircraft is bigger, making it easier to remove and replace components, and the aircraft uses less technology making it easier to

understand systems,” said Master Sgt. Mike Donahue, supervisor of the phase dock. “It is bigger, older and not as maintenance friendly as the F-16.”

“Right now it is a lot harder for the simple fact we have spent the last 20 years working on F-16s,” said Chief Hannah. “This F-15 is similar but very different, again the experience that we have on this aircraft is very little, but over time we will get a lot more efficient.”

However, some maintenance areas are finding the opposite. “For the egress shop, once we get over the learning curve the F-15 should be easier than the F-16 because we don't maintain the canopy which was labor intensive for us on the F-16,” said Master Sgt. Ed Higgins, who is assigned in the aircrew egress section.

For local Great Falls citizen, the event was also a special occasion. “This first sortie of the F-15 from Great Falls represents several years of hard work on the part of the MTANG to completely transition all their pilots, maintenance and support personnel to an entirely different combat aircraft,” said Mr. Mike Flaherty who is a member of the local Military Affairs Committee. “This first sortie indicates that the MTANG has been successful in meeting that challenge and that the 120th remains a critical part of the nation's defense now and for the future.”

A summation of the day's event was captured by Maj. Gardner. “To be able to continue flying fighter aircraft, train in the beautiful state of Montana and be a small part of a over 1,000 extremely talented airmen is without a doubt something to look forward to - hopefully for many years to come.”

The MTANG is scheduled to receive a total of 15 Eagles by the end of the year. The F-15 first flew in July 1972. It is one of the most recognized fighters of the modern day. The U.S Air Force plans to keep the F-15 in service until 2025, and is being replaced by the F-22 Raptor.

Maj. Rick Anderson
120th Fighter Wing Public Affairs



ABOVE: The F-15 banks over the airfield one last time before landing at the Great Falls airport.

LEFT: The familiar tail flash of the unit's former F-16 is recreated on the tail of the F-15. (U.S. Air Force Photos by Senior Master Sgt. Eric J. Peterson)

F-15 Weapons Crews Certified to Lock and Load

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New platform brings new challenges and training to the Weapons Shop

As the 120th Fighter Wing finishes its transition from the F-16 Falcon to the F-15 Eagle, many sections have had to undergo upgrade training for the new aircraft. In January, Airmen from the Weapons Shop Load Standardization Crew (LSC) finished their certification and showcased it by providing fellow Airmen and wing personnel a weapons load demonstration on an F-15 Eagle.

Master Sgt. Randy Lilly, LSC supervisor, and Tech. Sgts. Christopher Kunkel and Justin Thompson, LSC members, spent three months receiving their upgrade training at bases in Florida, Oregon and Idaho.

"We went down to the guard base in Jacksonville, Florida, where their LSC trained and certified us on each position. Now that we're certified, we'll be certifying each guardsman and each crew here at the base," said Sergeant Thompson. "Each person will be trained and have to load the F-15 twice. They will then be fully certified if both loads are good."

The unit's mission has evolved from air-to-ground to an air-to-air mission, so the weapon loaders will be learning to load the AIM-120 and the AIM-9 missiles, a change from the assortment of missiles and bombs the F-16 could be required to have loaded. The training is projected to take about two weeks per crew and will take place over the next year.

"We'll be in charge of making sure everyone knows what they are doing around the missiles, how to get them on the plane safely, and to make sure they come off the aircraft when the pilot wants them to," said Sergeant Lilly.

One of the biggest challenges faced by the weapons crews was the lack of aircraft to work and train on. During the transition, the wing was left without any aircraft as they awaited the arrival of the new fighters, making training upkeep tough.

"We're supposed to stay current on training every quarter, but it wasn't happening because we didn't have planes,"

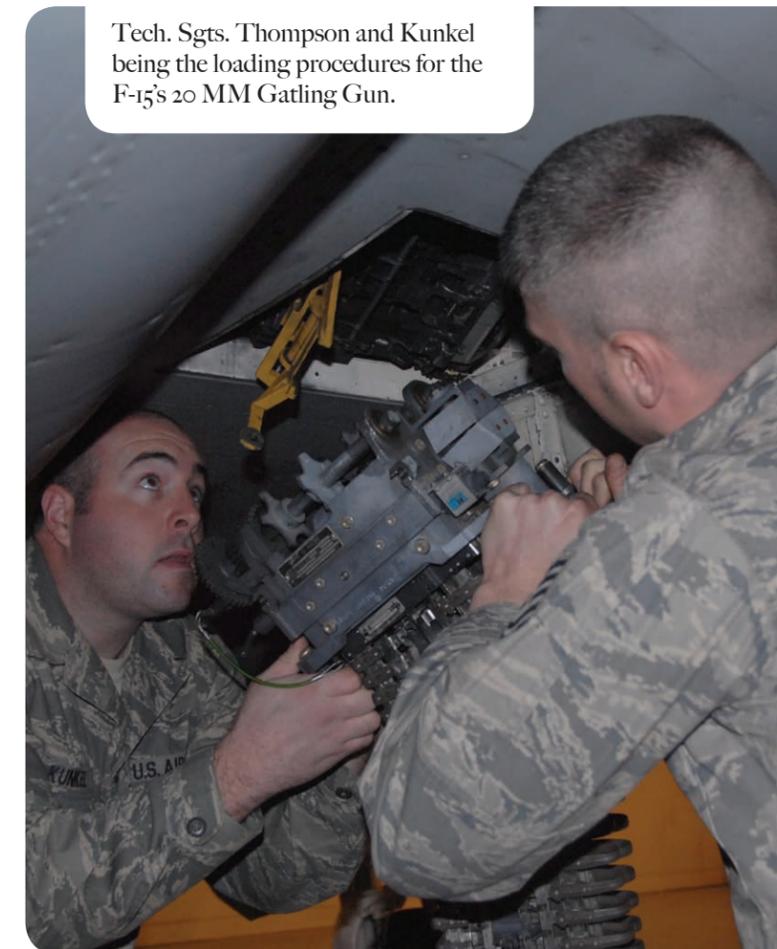
added Sergeant Lilly. "Now we're pushing to get everyone back up to speed."

Although most members of the crew have worked solely on the F-16, all agreed the transition would be an easy one to make.

"The airframe is quite a bit bigger and it has tighter spaces, but I think it will be a nice change of pace for the guardsmen. It's something new for them to learn and they're excited," said Sergeant Thomas.

Staff Sgt. Christy Mason
120th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

Tech. Sgts. Thompson and Kunkel being the loading procedures for the F-15's 20 MM Gatling Gun.



TOP: An F-15 Eagle sits waiting for the Weapons Shop to put on their loading demonstration.

BOTTOM: Tech. Sgts. Justin Thompson and Christopher Kunkel and Master Sgt. Randy Lilly load an AIM-9. (U.S. Air Force photos by Tech. Sgt. Jason Johnson)

Lt. Col. James McComas flies low over the flightline of the 120th FW, showing the familiar tail flash on a soon to be very familiar airframe. This flight, on Jan. 15th, was the first official F-15 Eagle sortie for the Montana Air National Guard. (U.S. Air Force Photo by Senior Master Sgt. Eric J. Peterson)



The Right Tool

Fabrication Builds the Right Tool for the Right Job

The 120th Fighter Wing's aircraft conversion to the F-15 is well on schedule, as pilots continue with flight training and mechanics learn to maintain the new aircraft systems.

A change to a new aircraft platform can present many challenges to the aircraft maintenance personnel that had become proficient working with the unit's previous aircraft, the F-16. Maintaining a new aircraft can mean a change in procedures and equipment, including the use of tools that are not often available for purchase through tool vendors or the local hardware store.

When aircraft maintenance procedures require the use of specialized tools that cannot be readily obtained, the expertise of the members assigned to the 120th Maintenance Squadron's Fabrication Element comes into play and a locally manufactured tool is built.

The 120th Fighter Wing Form 292, Local Manufacture Request, is initiated by the requestor when a locally produced tool is required. Individuals assigned to the Quality Assurance office review the form to ensure that the tool will perform as required and meet all safety requirements. When the tool is approved for local manufacturing, the machine shop will develop a list of materials and proceed to build the tool. Once the newly made tool passes all of the required tests, it is painted, etched and placed into the tool box for use on the aircraft.

According to Tech. Sgt. Shane Mikes, an aircraft armament systems journeyman, the local tool manufacturing provided by the machine and sheet-metal shops is an invaluable service to help his shop get the job done. "There are a lot of tools specified in the technical orders (T.O.) that are not available through commercial production, and they're very specific to the systems that we use in the F-15. You go through any of our T.O.s and you see a list that says 'local manufacture' on them, so we immediately have to task the machine shop with getting those tools built so we can do our jobs."

Thousands of tools have been made by members of the Fabrication Element, saving millions of dollars in manufacturing costs to the 120th Fighter Wing, estimates Master Sgt. Keith Bennett, a metals processing special-

ist. "A customer would have to take their request to a machine shop downtown, which is \$80 an hour. There are times when we worked on projects that literally have saved \$100,000 at a time. We pay for ourselves fast," said Sergeant Bennett.

The machine shop contains all the equipment needed to create the tools required for aircraft maintenance. Highly specialized equipment is utilized by members of the Fabrication Element as they build the tools, such as metal lathes, milling machines and the computer numeric control machine. This equipment uses data entered into a computer by the operator to make precise cuts into material that is secured onto a cutting platform.

The technical education becomes a great personal benefit to the Drill-Status Guardsmen assigned to the Fabrication Element as well, since many members can use the knowledge and experience gained at the 120th Fighter Wing to assist them as they pursue employment in the civilian sector. "It's very good training, because they can take the education that they get here to a downtown machine shop and have a good career in the machining industry," said Sergeant Bennett.

Tool schematics are often shared between units that fly similar aircraft. Innovative new tool designs that save money and time often generate cash awards provided by the government to the individual that designed the tool.

Sergeant Mikes considers the work provided by the Fabrication Element to be quick, reliable and of outstanding quality. The locally-manufactured tools help his shop complete their mission requirements on time. Nearly 100 tools have been produced by the Fabrication Element for his shop alone. "Everything is perfect, they are very precise, everything is to the exact specifications that the T.O. requires," said Sergeant Mikes, adding,



TOP: Master Sgt. Keith Bennett observes while Tech. Sgt. Sam Heinert operates the Computer Numeric Control (CNC) equipment in the machine shop.

BOTTOM: An assortment of tools made by the Fabrication Element are displayed on the machine shop bench. (U.S. Air Force photos by Senior Master Sgt. Eric J. Peterson)



"the guys that we have on base are awesome, they do a wonderful job for us."

Sergeant Bennett estimates that 40 percent of the work in his machine shop consists of producing locally-manufactured tools for the unit, but the creative and technical work produced by the Fabrication Element is far reaching. Nearly every section assigned to the 120th Fighter Wing has benefited from their assistance by building items such as stands, shelves or brackets.

Senior Master Sgt. Eric J. Peterson
120th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

Service Before Self

Patriotism, love of the flag fuel Honor Guard

The interwoven thread that binds the 30 active members of the 120th Fighter Wing's Base Honor Guard, is service before self, and a love for our flag.

The Montana Air National Guard participates in parades, funerals and also presents Operation Patriotism ceremonies. "The program began in 1974," explained Master Sgt. Dawn Paul Charron. "It was conceived by Gen. IG Brown during a sporting event in Knoxville, TN. As the national anthem was being played, General Brown observed that many people failed to show proper respect to the colors and the playing of the Star Spangled Banner. He challenged the Non-Commissioned Officer Academy Graduates at McGhee-Tyson Air National Guard Base to start a program to revitalize respect for the flag and to promote the ideals that make America a great nation," said Sergeant Charron.

Retired Master Sgt. Ernie Peters and retired Master Sgt. Rich Paul accepted General Brown's challenge and the Base Honor Guard was formed.

Master Sgt. Maureen Nilsen has been involved with the program for more than 22 years. "Master Sgt. Dike Gipe introduced me to the program. It is a rewarding experience to represent the Air Guard at a variety of events," said Sergeant Nilsen. "I believe in the flag and what it stands for."

The Honor Guard has been a part of events across the state from Glasgow in the northeast to Jackson in the southwest. Sergeant Nilsen's husband, Master Sgt. Earl Nilsen, has been with the group over ten years.

The Honor Guard also volunteers their services for military funerals, flag presentations to members of the deceased veteran's family, the firing of the 21-gun Volley, and the playing of Taps.

Master Sgt. Chris Wilson is a bugler with the honor guard. He and Senior Master Sgt. Eric Peterson perform Taps at military funerals. "I get a sense of pride, it's a tradition that I'm an integral part of the last ceremony for this individual that served our state and nation," said Sergeant Wilson.

Members of the Honor Guard believe in the principles of this country, and what those who went before us stood for and fought for. "I'm proud to be in the Guard, and I appreciate the sacrifice that so many have given," said Tech. Sgt. John McCallum, a member who joined the Honor Guard two years ago. "I enjoy talking with the families after the funeral service to hear their stories, and to tell them what I and the Guard do," said Sergeant McCallum. "I just feel that I must give something back for those that gave so much."

The Honor Guard has performed the Operation Patriotism program around the state in schools and civic organizations. They



Seven members of the Honor Guard firing party execute the command of port arms during a rehearsal for a funeral at Highland Cemetery in Great Falls, MT. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Master Sgt. Eric J. Peterson)

volunteer their time for military funerals for all branches of the armed forces and post the colors at awards ceremonies, sporting events and the Mrs. Montana Pageant, which was held in Billings. "I get goose bumps from my neck to my ankles when I see the flag, or hear Taps." Said Sergeant Charron. "When my kids were little they didn't learn nursery rhymes, they learned the Pledge of Allegiance."

The 120th Fighter Wing's Honor Guard was formed to honor those that gave service to our nation, and now the Department of Defense requires that units have a base honor guard detachment. The idea has come a long way from General Brown's challenge over 35 years ago.

For more information about becoming a member of the 120th Fighter Wing's Base Honor Guard, you may contact Master Sgt. Dawn Paul Charron at 791-0357 or Master Sgt. Maureen Nilsen at 791-0118.

Technical Sgt. Charlie Heit
120th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

The 120th Services Flight...Mmm, Mmm, Great!

When it comes to services, the 120th Services Flight has raised the bar for the entire Air National Guard.

"It really is fun to attend drill," said Staff Sgt. Crystal Hoffman, an 11-year member of the unit. As head baker and unit career advisor she gets to mentor the new arrivals. "We have developed a great team, and it is an enjoyable work place," said Sergeant Hoffman. "I wouldn't be in any other shop on the hill."

Airman 1st Class Sean Birdwell has the same assessment. After basic training and the six-and-a-half week technical school at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, Airman Birdwell hit the ground running when he joined the 120th Fighter Wing two years ago. Airman Birdwell brings a wealth of civilian experience to the Services Flight. "I've been working at the Prime Cut Restaurant in Great Falls for the past four-and-a-half years and the past two-and-a-half years as manager," said Airman Birdwell. "My life goal is to become a chef, and the National Guard is helping me to make that a reality."

The 120th Services Flight is comprised of only one AFSC, but there are nine different functional area codes to excel in. Some areas include cooking, baking, and desserts, but Services also extends to include the fit program, morale, recreation and welfare, lodging, laundry and exchange, and mortuary services.

"I wanted to get as far away from food as I could when I joined the Air Guard. I was a waitress at the time of my enlistment, but 14-and-a-half years later things have changed," explained Tech. Sgt. Michelle Rue. "Command Chief Master Sgt. Larry Seibel said it was a fun career, and he was right. I wouldn't change anything for the world. As the dining hall supervisor, I get a chance to do almost everything. I have the opportunity to train the new folks and in turn I get to re-teach myself and the excitement returns," said Sergeant Rue.

A portion of the 120th Services Flight mission statement says it all: to provide the state and nation with well trained and dedicated service professionals, capable and ready to provide unequalled service.

In 2006, the 120th Services Flight won the prestigious Disney Award, signifying the best services flight in the entire Air National Guard. "It was the first time in the history of the award that a unit entering for the first time, received the honor," said Sergeant Rue. "It was a lot of hard work, but when we found out we won, there were a lot of tears-tears of joy of course."

Soon the 120th Services Flight will be merging with the Mission Support Flight, to become the Force Support Squadron. This move is occurring Air Force wide. "I see it as a seamless transition, we already work with personnel with lodging and other matters, so there is some overlap," said Chief Leonard. "I'll challenge any section or shop in the 120th to come over here to see how hard my people work. They prove to me each time I see them in action that I have the greatest team one could ask for."

Technical Sgt. Charlie Heit
120th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

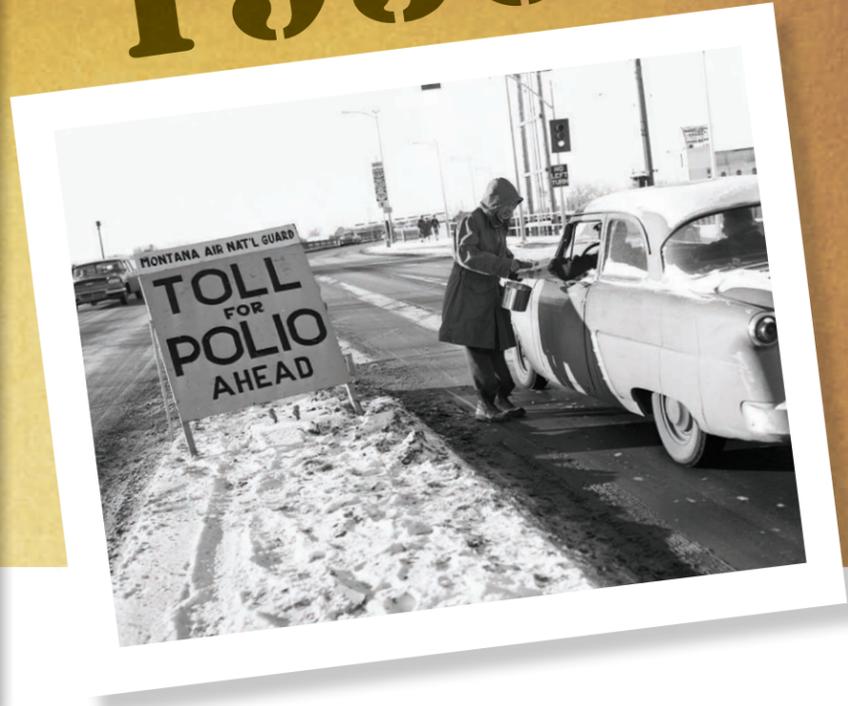


Members of the 120th Services Flight gather for a group portrait in front of the Dining Facility during the August 2008 UTA. (U.S. Air Force photo by Senior Master Sgt. Eric J. Peterson)

HISTORY *Of* THE MTANG

1959

On January 10, 1959, the 120th Fighter Group continued its practice of community service with its annual March of Dimes "Toll for Polio" campaign. Unit members standing on 1st Avenue North in Great Falls held buckets out to collect ten-cent donations from generous citizens passing the toll area in cars. Fundraisers such as these combined to help pay for research into polio and other children's diseases. The development and the subsequent approval of the Salk vaccine in 1955 ultimately helped eradicate polio in the industrialized countries.



The News You Can Use

New provision allows for salute during the national anthem

Veterans and servicemembers not in uniform can now render the military-style hand salute during the playing of the national anthem, thanks to changes in federal law that took effect in October.

The new provision improves upon a little known change in federal law last year that authorized veterans to render the military-style hand salute during the raising, lowering or passing of the flag, but it did not address salutes during the national anthem. Last year's provision also applied to servicemembers while not in uniform.

Traditionally, members of the nation's veterans service organizations have rendered the hand-salute during the national anthem and at events involving the national flag while wearing their organization's official head-gear.

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Veterans Administration

Provides a wealth of benefits to the men and women who have served in the U.S. military service. Benefits such as: burial, health, compensation & pension, home loan guaranty, and life insurance. Visit their Burial and Memorial Benefits section for eligibility information. www.va.gov

Ready.gov from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

Find out the latest threat advisory to national security and how you and your family can be better prepared in the event of a national emergency. www.ready.gov

Arlington National Cemetery

If you are or know an individual who currently or previously served in the U.S. military, or the spouse or child of a serving member, they may be eligible for burial benefits. Find out more. www.arlingtoncemetery.org

Veterans' Employment and Training Service (VETS)

This is a Department of Labor program that provides Veterans with the resources and services to succeed in the work force by maximizing their employment opportunities (through programs such as Veterans' Preference in Federal job hiring), protecting their employment rights and meeting labor-market demands with qualified Veterans. www.dol.gov/vets



Faces of the Guard

Lt. Col. Conwell Assumes Command



Lt. Col. Jennifer Conwell

The Wing Headquarters' January pre-UTA meeting was briefly interrupted as Col. McDonald relayed the official notification to Col. Mora, the acting Wing Headquarters' commander. The announcement was on behalf of the Air National Guard Assistant to The Command Staff Judge Advocate, Brig. Gen. F. Andrew Turley. Colonel Mora delivered the awaited message that Lt. Col. Jennifer Conwell is eligible to assume command and would become the Headquarters' Squadron commander. What made this event noteworthy is that a judge advocate can exercise command only with the express authorization of The Judge Advocate General, if they are the senior ranking member among a group of prisoners of war, or under extreme emergency field conditions. It proved to be a long and laborious process to get the approval and it's believed this is a first for the Air National Guard. Colonel Conwell currently resides in Billings with her husband James and two sons, Jack and Henry. Her employment is now exclusively with the Montana Air National Guard. She is active in her community volunteering extensively at her children's school and her church. She also serves as the secretary of the Montana National Guard Association. Colonel Conwell is a graduate from West Point Military Academy, the University of Montana School of Law, and the Air War College. She has assumed immediate command.



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