



Combat Aircraft joins the 140th Wing in Colorado to observe the Guardsmen operating in their home environment.

report and photos: **Henk de Ridder**

COLORADO'S STATE CAPITAL Denver, elevation 5,280ft, lies exactly one mile above sea level, making it one of the highest major cities in the US. Buckley Air Force Base, Aurora, home of the Colorado Air National Guard's 140th Wing, is in fact even higher, at an elevation of 5,662ft above sea level. This justifies the unofficial 'Mile High Militia' nickname used by the wing's 120th Fighter Squadron 'Cougars', flying the Block 30 F-16C/D. But the range of the 120th FS extends much further. The 'Cougars' have operated as far afield as Europe, the Middle East and South-west Asia. The squadron is also active in many different roles: air-to-air and air-to-ground, including offensive counter-air (OCA), defensive counter-air (DCA), OCA interdiction, close air support (CAS) and combat search and rescue (CSAR). The wing's other flying unit, the 200th Airlift Squadron, equipped with the C-21A, also regularly leaves the cold Rocky Mountain environment to operate in different conditions.

The F-16 Fighting Falcon has been based at Buckley AFB since 1991. It replaced the famous A-7D, the US Air Force version of the Corsair II, a specialized subsonic close air support platform. The last A-7D departed Buckley in March 1992. After regaining operational status, the 120th FS has undertaken several deployments worldwide. Exercises have included trips to Karup in Denmark in August 1997 for NATO's 'Coronet Blade', with mini-deployments to Germany to fly with Luftwaffe MiG-29s and to Slovenia for state-to-state partnership; to Australia in March 1995 for training with the Royal Australian Air Force; and to South Korea in 2006 for a multi-national exercise.

Operational deployments have taken in Operation 'Provide Comfort II' at Incirlik, Turkey, in April 1995; 'Southern Watch' at Al Jaber, Kuwait, in June 1996, and again in Kuwait during January 1998; and 'Northern Watch' in Turkey in 2000.

The 120th FS mobilized and deployed to South-west Asia during February 2003 in support of Operation 'Enduring Freedom'. While there, a force of 16 aircraft and over 30 pilots from the 120th flew more than 500 combat sorties, consisting of 2,500 hours, in the course of which over 350 precision-guided weapons were dropped. All personnel and jets returned safely home that summer. The unit subsequently deployed to Iraq in support of Operation 'Iraqi Freedom' in summer 2004, as well as during the winter of 2007-08, and again in the summer of 2009.

Mission and role

Although most of the missions flown by the 120th FS have an air-to-ground charter, the squadron maintains two



ON GUARD MILE HIGH

140TH WING, COLORADO AIR NATIONAL GUARD



This photo: Like most ANG F-16 units, that of the Colorado ANG maintains a multi-role status, able to turn its hand to air defense and ground attack as required.

Top left: SSgt Dave Trosper, 140th Aircraft Maintenance Squadron, directs the loading of a GBU-54 laser JDAM during an Operational Readiness Exercise at Buckley. USAF/TSgt Wolfram M. Stumpf

Inset: Maj Mike Gommel is typical of many ANG pilots in being very experienced with more than 3,000 flight hours under his belt.

F-16s on a 15-minute alert for air-to-air interception. Maj Mike Gommel, who had just completed a 24-hour alert shift, told *Combat Aircraft* that about 30 per cent of sorties are dedicated to air-to-air work. 'The other 70 per cent are air-to-ground. Over the last years we have been in a lot of foreign campaigns. There the air-to-ground role was the only one done'. In Iraq, 'Scud'-hunting missions were also flown.

In its role as part of the Homeland Defense Mission, Buckley AFB is the only centrally-located alert fighter location in the US, and offers national protection around the clock, 365 days a year. The Homeland Defense Mission began after the September 11, 2001 attacks and ensures that the US remains safe, secure and resilient against terrorism and other threats.

Two 'Cougars' F-16s are ready to scramble if any unannounced aircraft enters the mid-section of the US. Maj Gommel continues: 'If the horn goes off, we scramble out to our jets to get airborne as fast as possible. Also, during a training scramble we treat it as a real threat situation. The F-16 is able

to fly very fast for interceptions, but is also capable of flying at a very slow speed for keeping up with slow-moving aircraft, like an unannounced Cessna'. In 2012 there were 24 Aerospace Control Alert events, of which one led to a real scramble.

The inventory of the 120th consists of 17 F-16C Block 30s and one two-seat F-16D Block 30. For the air sovereignty role the 120th F-16s are configured to carry two AIM-120 AMRAAM and two AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles. The 'Vipers' are also equipped with Raytheon's SADL (Situational Awareness Data Link) system. This means that the F-16 driver can exploit information drawn from a variety of different sources. Information thus flows into the cockpit from an AWACS aircraft, for example, or from fellow fighters.

When CA joined the 120th FS, the day's mission involved an air-to-ground practice flight dropping 500lb GBU-12 laser-guided bombs, spiked to their targets with the Litening targeting pod. Although the flying time was 1.5 hours, the entire cycle took a hefty 10 hours. Maj Gommel explains:

'It takes four hours to brief and plan, 30 minutes of checking and inspection of the aircraft, 90 minutes for flying the mission, and four hours of debriefing'. The four hours of briefing and planning for the 09.00hrs mission were completed the day before the actual flying. Exactly on time, the F-16s, using the squadron's callsign 'Redeye', headed for the runway to get airborne in the chilly sky over the Rocky Mountains. The aircraft headed for the airburst target range, which they use most of the time to make their practice runs. The results of their actions are reported immediately from the range to Buckley AFB, so they can be discussed in the debriefing to get an even better result during the next practice or during a real wartime mission.

200th Airlift Squadron

The 200th Airlift Squadron, based at Peterson AFB, near Colorado Springs, is another 140th Wing flying unit. It operates two Gates Learjet C-21As, of which the first example arrived in November 1997. The



squadron's task is to provide secure priority airlift throughout the world for the highest level of military and civilian leaders. After the September 11 attacks, the squadron transported emergency responders to New York and Washington DC. Soon afterwards it began a new mission, providing target aircraft for North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) air defense exercises. The 200th AS also supported disaster relief missions after Hurricanes *Katrina* and *Rita* in 2005. The squadron uses its C-21As within a joint ANG/AMC (Air Mobility Command) structure. Since 2006 it has worked closely with the active-duty 311th Airlift Squadron, which is part of the 375th Airlift Wing and is also based at Peterson. Under an inter-fly agreement signed between the units, the squadrons share their jets, pilots and deployments.

In February 2010 the 200th AS participated in its first combat deployment, sending six crew members to support Operations 'Iraqi Freedom' and 'Enduring Freedom'. Since then, several more have deployed and the unit continues to support

and augment the active duty in-theater mission.

Life of a Guardsman

Of the 1,500 personnel in the entire 140th Wing, approximately 40 per cent are in full-time service; 60 per cent are traditional Guardsmen who come in two days each month for 'Drill Weekend' and then again periodically throughout the year, according to mission requirements. Before entering a Guard unit, most of the personnel have served in an active-duty unit.

The active-duty Air Force, Air Force Reserve and the Air National Guard are all part of the same team, known as the Total Force, but administratively they are different. If an active-duty member wants to join the Air National Guard, he or she must first separate from active duty and then be hired into the Guard in their state of choice. Once a member of the Guard, you can stay in that unit as long as you like, although, depending upon the opportunities for advancement, some people transfer to other state guard units, or undertake assignments

at the National Guard Bureau in Washington DC in order to develop professionally.

Working in the Air National Guard is different from the active-duty Air Force in the sense that Guard members are not forced to move to another assignment every two to three years and can stay in the same state's Guard unit for their whole career if they so wish. The 120th FS includes 44 airmen, of which 33 are pilots. Maj Gommel was also an active-duty member of the US Air Force, flying B-1s and T-38s and being stationed in Texas at Dyess AFB, Laughlin AFB and Randolph AFB. He logged 3,300 flying hours in total with the USAF.

Although budget cuts are an ever-present feature that affects today's US forces, the 140th Wing is set to retain its role with the F-16s at Buckley, although flight hours will be reduced in an effort to save money. ❏

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This photo: **A 120th FS 'Cougars' F-16C taxis out for a local training flight. The Block 30 F-16C/Ds have notched up an impressive service record, and will ultimately be replaced by the F-35A.**

Right top to bottom: **A pair of Royal Jordanian Air Force F-16s leads a 120th Fighter Squadron, Colorado Air National Guard F-16C and two US Marine Corps F/A-18Cs from VMFA-115 during Exercise 'Eager Lion', which was held in Jordan in July.**
US ANG/Sr MSgt John P. Rohrer

A 120th FS F-16C is turned around rapidly as the pilot from the first mission wave of the day exits the cockpit, ready to hand the jet to a colleague for a second mission.

