



Guard's domestic relief mission takes flight

Aviators supported civil authorities during '20s & '30s

By Susan Rosenfeld, Ph.D., C.A.

Drifts 60 feet high isolated Silverton, Colo., in March, 1927. The snow began piling up in November and by late February trains could no longer come into the town. Although the residents still had food and water, they feared a disease outbreak. Help was needed.

No plane had ever flown over the Continental Divide in that part of the Rockies before and an attempt March 3 to fly in supplies from Denver failed. Two days later, 1st Lt. Daniel F. Kearns of the Colorado National Guard's 120th Observation Squadron accompanied by his mechanic, Master Sgt. Clyde Plank, answered the challenge in their unit's Douglas O-2C biplane. Despite an open cockpit, no bottled oxygen, and "an under-powered 400-horsepower Liberty engine," they flew as high as 18,000 feet, braving high winds to cross the mountains. Kearns claimed he never encountered a safe place to land if the plane experienced trouble. After five hours, they arrived over Silverton and dropped their medicine, mail and newspapers onto a snow bank near a crowd of 1,000 cheering residents. Many of the townspeople had never seen an airplane before. They later showed their gratitude by sending Kearns and Plank \$150.

Considered by the Denver Post, "the most daring feat in the aviation history of the state" to that time, this "mercy flight," portrayed one type of support for civil authorities that National Guard aviators per-

formed during the '20s and '30s. They also assisted states and localities during other disasters like floods and fires, and civil disturbances like labor strikes. In addition, they helped law enforcement hunt fugitives and even collected air samples for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Melting snows in the Western mountains added to unusually heavy rains that had started in late summer 1926. By the end of the following April, floods affected some 27,000 square miles in 10 states along the Mississippi River and its tributaries, from Illinois to Louisiana. The 1927 flood produced one of the worst natural disasters in American history. Approximately 700,000 people were displaced and 246 individuals died; over 130,000 homes were lost and property damage ran more than \$350 million (approximately \$5 billion today).

Reputedly, Arkansas suffered the most when crevasses opened up in levees. For example, one opened in Pine Bluffs that inundated over 150,000 acres. The Arkansas governor called up 10 officers and 50 enlisted members from that state's 154th Observation Squadron. With their Curtiss JN-4 and JN-6 aircraft, they began performing relief duties April 18. Besides looking for crevasses, the Guardsmen airlifted food, medicines and supplies for workers filling sandbags and bolstering levees. In some instances, Guard aviators provided the only reliable communications and command and control to the governor. The planes flew over 20,000 miles before the 154th ended its active duty on May 3. The '27 floods represented the first time that a governor mobilized an entire Guard flying unit using its own aircraft to assist civil authorities in a major natural disaster. In the remaining years of the interwar period, Guard aviation units helped their states contend with devastating floods.

During the interwar period, several states experienced civil unrest associated with labor disputes in their mines. Those episodes sometimes prompted governors to call upon the National Guard either

to help keep the peace or to subdue miners when they turned militant. Guard observation squadrons performed strike duty in several states during that period. For example, in 1932, unrest persisted off and on for several months in Ohio coal fields despite the efforts of pro-miner Gov. George White to prevent violence. During strikes that June, 2nd Lt. Karl E. Bushong of the Ohio National Guard dropped tear gas on two occasions from his Douglas O-38. The first time, June 7, 1932, he dispersed approximately 100 pickets, from the Wolf Run Mine using some 25 tear gas bombs as well as firing his machine gun at a nearby hillside as a warning. The local sheriff requested Bushong's services because the demonstrators, mostly women, threw stones at the working miners. In response, the striking miners began shooting and throwing rocks at the plane, forcing it to return to its base for repairs.

In contrast, Bushong's second tear gas assault targeted strike-breakers. The previous month, Gov. White ended a series of strikes with a 10-point plan meant to pacify the miners while not antagonizing mine operators. His plan included a fair wage for the miners without accepting union recognition and collective bargaining. In addition, Brig. Gen. Frank D. Henderson, Ohio's adjutant general, produced a memorandum allowing only miners who lived "a reasonable distance" from the picketed mines to work during strikes. Despite continued strikes in June, many mines reopened, like Wolf Run, scene of the first tear gas bombing. One operator, at Powhatan, brought strike-breakers in from West Virginia. On June 30, Ohio strikers intercepted the West Virginians as they crossed the Ohio River to the mine. According to one account, 15 boatloads carrying 60 men fought each other with oars and clubs. The mine superintendent then called in Bushong to drop tear gas bombs on the West Virginians while Guardsmen on the Ohio riverbank fired warning shots at the strikebreakers. By supporting the strikers, the mine superintendent made it clear that the Guard would only assist operators who cooperated with the governor's program and the Henderson memorandum.

National Guard aviators also aided the states by locating and reporting information regarding fires. Most fire duty involved wildfire reconnaissance, as Minnesota's 109th Observation Squadron did in 1922. However, a fire on a cruise ship provided a unique opportunity for a governor to actually command his aviators. In the early hours of Sept. 8, 1934, the cruise ship S.S. Morro Castle caught fire returning to New York from Havana. New Jersey Gov. A. Harry Moore had been vacationing in nearby Sea Girt, N. J., and called upon every military and private vessel available to brave strong winds, rain and high seas to rescue passengers and crew who fled the burning vessel, many by jumping directly into the water. The state's 119th Observation Squadron answered his call in their Douglas O-38E biplanes.

In addition to the wind and high waves, the low-flying aircraft also battled smoke rising 200 feet high. Capt. John A. Carr carried a special passenger as observer – the governor himself. Allegedly without protective goggles in order to see better, Gov. Moore, like other National Guard observers, searched the waters for people. When an observer located someone, the pilot circled his plane around the nearest rescue boat and led it to the stranded person. Sadly, many of those they found had died; but according to one account, Moore found at least four people alive, including two who had floated beyond the rescue area. That rescue was achieved "with the governor standing up in the cockpit, leaning over the side, and waving encouragement." In the end, at least 130 of the 318 passengers and 244 crew members died, but the toll could have been greater had not the 119th directed rescue boats to survivors.

Although relatively unknown, Guard aviators established a solid record of helping state authorities deal with natural disasters and civil unrest during the interwar period. As a byproduct of preparations for their federal mission, they were able to furnish valuable aerial reconnaissance, communications and transportation capabilities that were not otherwise readily available to civil authorities.



2nd Lt. Karl E. Bushong

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