Air National Guard History

‘Contact!’ National Guard’s journey into aviation began with some pushing and pulling

By Charles J. Gross, Ph.D.
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The National Guard served as a hotbed of early, grassroots aviation. Key individuals persevered despite a lack of funding and interest by military leadership.

Like the Army, that enthusiasm had been foreshadowed by ballooning. In April 1908, a group of Guard enthusiasts had organized an “aerialistic club” to encourage the activity to learn ballooning, but there is no evidence that they ever actually ascended in those devices. In 1910, unit members raised $500 privately to buy their first aircraft. The investment disappeared when the plane crashed on takeoff during maneuvers that same year.

There were several other early efforts to form Guard aero units in various states by civilian flyers, businessmen and Guardsmen. They were as interested in promoting the general development of American aviation as they were in establishing Guard aviation. The Missouri Guard established a small aero detachment in 1909. California established an aeronautical detachment in its 7th Coast Artillery Company March 12, 1911. Eugene Ely, the first man to launch an aircraft from the deck of a warship, was the detachment’s first private and the first pilot to be commissioned in that state.

Several states had established small aviation branches within their National Guard organizations by 1916. Aside from New York, none were able to provide those fledgling air organizations with anything approaching adequate financial support. Nebraska’s experience was apparently typical. The state’s experiment with military aviation began in 1913 when members of its signal corps branch assembled a Curtiss Model D biplane. The plane probably participated in the branch’s annual encampment that year but there was no official recognition of aviation’s existence in the Nebraska Guard. Formal acknowledgement came on July 15, 1915, when the state issued an order organizing its aviation corps. Capt. Castle W. Schaffer was assigned as its chief. A little organizing its aviation corps. Capt. Castle

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by an initial $12,500 gift from the Aero Club of New York City and other private contributions, the Redding Guard aviators rented two aircraft and financed the training of student pilots at private flying schools.

On Nov. 1, 1915, Bolling organized and was appointed commander of the first real Guard aviation unit, the 1st Aero Company, New York National Guard.

Bolling’s air unit was called into federal service on July 13, 1916, during the nation’s first airmail service. The plane probably par-deck of a warship, was the detachment’s first private and the first pilot to be commissioned in that state.

The Army had begun sending Guardsmen to field school in late 1915. In August 1916, Fleet was selected for flight training. He transferred to the 1st Aero Reserve Squadron in May 1917 and was released from federal service on Nov. 2, 1916 and disbanded on May 12, 1917. Bolling was disillusioned by the whole experience at Mineola. He doubted that aviation could ever be a success in the Guard because it was costly and highly technical. There was no shortage of volunteers to learn flying. But Bolling concluded that Guard aero units would never attract enough qualified enlisted mechanics.

Bolling and virtually all of the members of the 1st Aero Co. left the Guard. They joined the Army Signal Corps Reserve and founded the 1st Aero Reserve Squadron in May 1917 which was sent to France in August 1917. Bolling’s skepticism was shared by the acting chief of the Militia Bureau, Col. G.W. McKelvie, a regular Army officer. The War Department decided Guard aviation units would not be activated during World War I. Instead, those organizations were disbanded and their members were encouraged to volunteer for active duty as individuals.

Those early years were the opening chapter of the long and difficult struggle by National Guard aviation to win the right to fight as well-equipped and properly-trained units of America’s armed forces.

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The aviators operated with either of the state’s two infantry regiments as training requirements dictated. Apparently, most of Schaffer’s flights were visual reconnaissance missions conducted in direct support of the infantry. In July, Edgar Bagnell, a private in the Guard, was commissioned a first lieutenant in the flying organization. Schaffer apparently gave up flying after a crash landing during the summer of 1915. Bagnell was mustered into federal service in 1916. McMillen was killed when his airplane crashed during the branch’s annual encampment in New York. His death marked the effective end of Nebraska’s military aviation experiment.

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