

# The Bumpy Road to Guard Modernization

In November 1949, Lt. Gen. Ennis C. Whitehead, commander of Continental Air Command, determined that “at best, the Air National Guard represents aircraft in flyable storage.”

No one today should question the Air Guard’s critical integration with the Active Duty force or its contributions to state or national security. Those still holding historical viewpoints should look closer. “Creative minds are necessary more than ever,” notes Air Force Gen. Joseph L. Lengyel, chief of the National Guard Bureau, in the Guard’s 2018 posture statement. “We must inspire a culture willing to change.”

Change can be painful, irrespective of culture. The past 15 years at Michigan’s Battle Creek Air National Guard Base, which once flew A-10 attack jets, are a useful case study in this.

In 2003, the 110th Fighter Wing was on the front line as Operation Iraqi Freedom began.

In 2005, the Battle Creek base—at W. K. Kellogg Airport—was marked for base realignment and closure (BRAC). Airmen there were later told they would transfer their A-10 mission to Selfridge Air National Guard Base, halfway across the state, and lose their flying mission—but not until 2008. The 110th was assigned a C-21 VIP airlift mission instead.

In early 2007, the 110th upgraded its soon-to-be-relocated A-10As to A-10C status. That September, the wing deployed to Iraq again. They were no sooner on the ground, when the unit was suddenly and unexpectedly moved to Afghanistan. USAF’s F-15 fleet had been grounded after a Missouri Guard Eagle broke in half during a routine flight, so the 110th went to war in Afghanistan with no notice or mission-specific preparation.

## The Air Guard is positioning for the future—a long and tumultuous process.

Throughout 2008 the wing phased out its A-10 operations and stood up an air operations group.

“2009 was spent converting to the C-21,” said Col. Kier D. Knapp, 110th Attack Wing vice commander. “Originally we were supposed to get seven C-21s but ended up with only three.” Knapp told *Air Force Magazine* the C-21 was intended to be a “bridge” to keep pilots current until a follow-on aircraft arrived.

The wing began preparations to convert to C-27J small airlift operations, another radical departure from attack jets or pointy-nose VIP transports. Then USAF canceled its plans to field the C-27J. Hundreds of airmen would lose their jobs, Knapp noted. “There was a mad scramble to ... start yet another conversion to a new mission.”

What appears to be the permanent plan finally emerged in 2013, and the wing built an MQ-9 Reaper cadre. The 110th Attack Wing now flies the MQ-9, without aircraft at the base, but after more than a decade of churn, there is finally a solid, long-term plan.

In December 2015, the wing learned it would add another 21st century mission, gaining a cyber operations squadron.

And what of Battle Creek’s old A-10s? They’re still flying, at the 127th Wing at Selfridge, where airmen have experienced the



In 2008, A-10s of the 110th Fighter Wing, based in Battle Creek, Mich., fly over the southwest part of the state. The unit flew Warthogs from 1991 to 2009, then the C-21 and C-27J. It is now the 110th Attack Wing, operating the MQ-9.

same turmoil and uncertainty that has roiled Battle Creek and many other bases.

In 2005, Selfridge flew F-16s, C-130s, and Reserve KC-135 tankers. BRAC ordered the Reserve unit away and replaced the F-16s with Battle Creek’s A-10s. Different, ANG-operated KC-135s arrived.

The 127th finished converting to the A-10C in 2011 and deployed to Afghanistan that year, just before USAF announced its intent to retire the A-10s but give Selfridge four more KC-135s.

This would have ended Selfridge’s century-old fighter mission. In 2007, Col. Michael T. Thomas, then the 127th Wing commander, described this constant reorganization as a “shell game.”

Selfridge still faces an uncertain future, but the base is on the short list of locations under consideration to receive Guard-assigned F-35 strike fighters in the early 2020s. Brig. Gen. John D. Slocum, the 127th commander, is optimistic about this summer’s basing decision. He says Selfridge could easily park 21 F-35s inside the base’s existing hangars, and there is plentiful, high-quality range space available in northern Michigan.

The Air Guard faces most of the same problems as the regular Air Force, including pilot, maintainer, and cyber operator shortages, old equipment, and an unsustainable optempo in some areas—such as KC-135 operations.

A constant state of flux damages readiness, recruiting, and morale at a time when USAF is being asked to do ever more. The ANG is posturing itself for the future, but a clear lesson from two Guard bases in Michigan is that long-term instability creates a host of problems. A note to Congress and the Pentagon bureaucracy: It’s best for the nation to create a plan for airpower—and stick to it.

Photo: 110th Attack Wing