

Big Sky Kings

The “Vigilantes” of the Montana Air National Guard now take to the air in F-15C Eagles.

Photography by Ted Carlson





Two F-15Cs of the Montana Air National Guard's 120th Fighter Wing strike out on a practice intercept mission. After flying the F-16 since 1987, the "Vigilantes" (see inset patch) have converted to the F-15C.

The Air National Guard facility at Great Falls, Mont., was quiet for six months after the last F-16 left, but it has been roaring with activity since January, as the 120th Fighter Wing has been converting to the F-15C Eagle. The unit has been in the interceptor business going back to 1955, when it was equipped with F-89 Scorpions. Over the years, the unit converted first to the F-102 and then the F-106, and finally the F-16A. In 2001, new F-16Cs dictated a shift to the multirole-ground attack mission, and the 120th went into the Air and Space Expeditionary Force rotation. Now it's back on strip alert with the F-15C—but the wing is still available for deployment.



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[1] An F-15C awaits its next scramble. [2] The familiar Montana tail flash that once graced F-16s now adorns the F-15. [3] Ready at the hangar at Great Falls Airport, a 186th Fighter Squadron Eagle powers up. [4] Lt. Col. Michael Buck conducts the pre-flight as rain begins to fall.



[1] Eagles receive tender loving care in the cavernous Great Falls ANG hangar. (The F-15 at right, from Mountain Home AFB, Idaho, was on assignment at Great Falls.) The conversion from F-16s was a by-product of the Base Realignment and Closure process. The 120th retained its manned fighter mission, unlike many Guard units that are shifting to an unmanned aircraft or support role, or being

inactivated. **[2]** TSgt. Jason Bowers of the 186th FS directs an F-15 pilot. **[3]** Gear up, an F-15C heads out to the range. There are excellent ranges near Great Falls where F-15 pilots can let loose and fly supersonic in Montana's Big Sky. Unfettered ranges are increasingly rare in the lower 48. **[4]** End of runway checks are a last chance to catch anything amiss. Great Falls' F-15s are considered in

relatively good shape despite their long years of service, and they will receive the "Golden Eagle" upgrade over time. This will include structural and avionics improvements, as well as newer weapons. **[5]** Capt. Carol Kohtz ascends the crew ladder of her F-15. Its serial number marks it as having been bought in 1980.

[1] TSgt. Bret DePratu (l) and MSgt. Brian Haentges stand watch over the Great Falls flight line. They are with the 120th Security Forces Squadron. **[2]** Crew chief TSgt. Brad Roman-chuk (l) talks to a pilot. (MSgt. Shawn Briggs is in the background.) **[3]** An Eagle clears the runway. **[4]** Still graceful after 35 years, an F-15C plies the skies of Montana. It is carrying an AIM-120 AMRAAM and a range instrumentation pod. **[5]** The Eagle's talons: A transporter bears AIM-9M (top) and AIM-9X (bottom) Sidewinder missiles. The AIM-9X is the most agile and spoof-proof dogfight missile yet fielded. These are inert training rounds, as the blue stripes signify.





[1] A half-dozen Eagles line the ramp at Great Falls. Note the “Vigilantes” inscription on the inboard vertical tails. Not as mechanically sophisticated as the F-16s they replace with the Montana Air Guard, the F-15s are larger, with two engines instead of the F-16’s one, and with fewer diagnostic systems, making them a different maintenance challenge. However, the Eagles’ larger size makes access to

their systems somewhat easier. **[2]** SrA. Anjelina Klein repairs an oxygen mask in the 120th’s life support shop. **[3]** In its “clean” configuration, the F-15 remains one of the most agile and powerful fighters in the world. **[4]** Kohtz pops the massive F-15 speed brake. Her Eagle sports an AMRAAM and AIM-9X on the left wing. Boeing is the prime contractor for the Eagle, having merged with McDon-

nell Douglas, the Eagle’s designer and builder, in the 1990s. **[5]** Crew chief SSgt. John Edwards buttons up a panel on a bracingly cold Montana day in February. At top left is the business end of the F-15’s 20 mm cannon. Montana ANG Eagles will eventually get the Joint Helmet-Mounted Cueing System, which will allow them to shoot off-boresight at enemies just by looking in the right direction.

[1] SSgt. Anastacio Navarro (l) and SSgt. Keith Gottloe work behind the dashboard of an F-15C. The ACES II ejection seat has been removed for service. **[2]** Crew chief SSgt. Chad Parcel snaps a salute to departing F-15Cs. The wavy two-tone camouflage is the third pattern USAF has applied to the fighter; it's called the "Mod Eagle." **[3]** Eagles stand ready to intercept suspicious aircraft that may come in over the Canadian border, a scant 100 miles to the north of Great Falls. **[4]** The 120th's F-15 pilots will often practice dogfights with each other in the local area, but deployments to Red Flag and other exercises are likely before too long. **[5]** Buck with his F-15 before beginning another mission.





[1] The F-15C's large size is evident in this photo; crews once called the upper rear surface the "tennis court."
[2] A brace of F-15s line up for a two-ship launch. **[3]** The F-15 remains the unbeaten heavyweight champ in real-world air combat, with more than 100 victories and zero losses in dogfights over its 35-year history. **[4]** Maj. Scott Smith and Lt. Col. Steve DeMilliano carry their gear to their waiting Eagle. More than 900 Guardsmen of the 120th FW keep the F-15s on 24-hour alert. ■