

KCCI takes exclusive tour with Iowa Air National Guard

See missions the Air Guard still performs, even though F-16 fighter jets departed years ago



Updated: 4:16 PM CDT May 1, 2019

[Todd Magel](#)

[Anchor/Reporter](#)

[Play Video](#)

SHOW TRANSCRIPT

DES MOINES, Iowa (KCCI) —

When federal agents arrested alleged members of the notorious central Iowa C-Block in Des Moines a few weeks ago, a special Iowa Air National Guard plane secretly flew overhead to monitor the operation.

It's one of the new military missions that Iowa Air National Guard has been working on since the well-known F-16 fighter jets left Des Moines in 2013.

The F-16s and other jets before them defined the Iowa Air National Guard because they were loud and everyone knew when they were flying over Des Moines. Six years later, more than 900 guardsmen and women are doing new jobs to help keep Iowa and the United States safe.

CAPTURING A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW

KCCI took advantage of a rare opportunity to climb aboard an Iowa Army Guard Blackhawk helicopter to capture a bird's-eye view of the 132 Fighter Wing at the Des Moines airport.

From the sky, you can see the layout of the 78-year-old Iowa Air Guard base, which is tucked away off McKinley Avenue on the north side of the airport.

KCCI was there as a Boeing KC-135 military Stratotanker transported a group of airmen and women.

But seeing a military plane at the airbase is not as common as it once was.



In 2012, the Air Force decided to remove the guard's famous F-16 fighter jets. The 132 Fighter Wing has been much quieter ever since, but the mission hasn't ended; it has just changed.

"The biggest change is not being as present to the community," said Col. Mark Chidley, 132nd Air Wing Commander. "We don't hear the roar of the jets anymore."

The guard's primary role has not changed. The includes domestic operations like communications, engineering and disaster rescue.

Chidley was here in 2012 when the announcement came from the Air Force. The F-16s were going away due to a nationwide aircraft cutback -- and the men and women of the Iowa Air Guard would have to reinvent themselves.

NEW MISSIONS AFTER F-16S DEPART

“Anytime an organization has to go through change, it is challenging,” Chidley said. “We had more than 550 who had to retrain to do missions, and it was a significant emotional event.”

Senior Master Sgt. Bobby Shepherd, a former F-16 mechanic, added: “It was a little heart-throbbing at first. Where am I going to go? I knew I always wanted to be a part of this unit.”

Shepherd has been with the Iowa Air Guard since he was 17. “You name it, on that airplane, I put it back together, basically, and tear it apart,” he said.



When the jets left, he had to retrain and is now with Air National Guard public affairs.

“It’s a totally different world, but I love it because I get to be in everybody’s shoes as I tell their story,” Shepherd said.

Without the F-16s and other aircraft, most people in the Des Moines metropolitan area forget about the Air Guard, Shepherd said.

“Even my friends don’t understand, even though you try to tell them the best you can what we do,” he said.

New missions have transformed what the Iowa Air Guard does.

The MQ-9 Reaper is the most intriguing. KCCI can’t show you where the secret office is located, but every day, 24/7, Des Moines-based pilots use controls to remotely operate aircraft halfway around the globe.

They keep an eye on the enemy and can even strike the enemy with the click of a joystick.

“We considered it to be very similar (in) capability to the F-16,” Chidley said.

HIGH TECH, BIG INVESTMENTS

Other new missions include helping law enforcement agencies with counterdrug operations. KCCI learned that an RC-26 twin-engine turboprop secretly flew over Des Moines as federal agents rounded up alleged C-Block gang members a few weeks ago.



“We were very helpful, not only in making sure that their agents were safe, but they had the best real-time information of what was going on,” Chidley said.

RELATED: [Officials charge 15 suspected gang members in major bust](#)

Along that same line, Iowa guardsmen and women now operate a classified cyberdefense operation, which, for example, helped with election cybersecurity during the last presidential election. A special team performs top-secret satellite imagery analysis, ranging from military targets to remote flood damage assessment.

From the chefs who cook every day for as many as 900 hungry guardsmen and women to the Army Guard pilots who stop by once a week for Blackhawk helicopter training, the Iowa Air National Guard continues to be a \$90 million economic component to Des Moines and the state of Iowa.

It just all happens with fewer planes and a little less noise than the old days.

“We started as a wing in 1941 right here in the Des Moines airport, and as much as things have changed with mission sets, it’s still the same great group of airmen doing great things,” Chidley said.

Follow this story to get instant e-mail alerts from **KCCI** on the latest developments and related topics.