

National Guard: Wisconsin Air Guard unit marks diamond anniversary

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The Wisconsin Air National Guard's 128th Air Refueling Wing officially turns 75 this month, but its roots reach back to before the Air Force was a separate branch of the U.S. military.

The 126th Observation Squadron formed in November 1940 as part of the Wisconsin National Guard. Called to active duty in June 1941, the squadron was sent to Hyannis Army Airfield in Massachusetts and performed antisubmarine patrols off the New England coast until it was deactivated in 1942, and its personnel sent to other units. The Army activated the squadron in March 1943 at Fort Meyers Army Airfield as the 126th Reconnaissance Squadron. By August the tactical reconnaissance unit became the 34th Photographic Reconnaissance Squadron, and was assigned to the 9th Air Force's 10th Photo Reconnaissance Group in Europe. In August 1944 the 34th PRS was given the mission to photograph the Normandy beaches ahead of the D-Day amphibious landings.

The 34th PRS supported the 3rd U.S. Army in Europe until V-E Day. After World War II, the squadron was redesignated as the 126th Fighter Squadron, and allotted to the Wisconsin National Guard. Sixteen volunteers began meeting in Milwaukee in October 1946 to organize the Wisconsin Air National Guard's first unit. Among them was Kenneth Sweet, a World War II veteran who was on duty at Wheeler Air Field as a mechanic when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941.

"Of those 16, we started recruiting — everybody we met, we'd twist their arms," Sweet said. "Most of the young men were right out of World War II, and it was fairly easy."

From January through June 1947, Sweet and his fellow volunteers met every

Wednesday night for two hours.

“This was no pay, but it meant getting the Guard going again,” he explained.

They had organized enough people to receive federal recognition on June 29, 1947, and Sweet was hired as a federal technician for the new organization, located at Mitchell Field. The first Wisconsin Air National Guard units in Milwaukee included the 128th Fighter Group; the 126th Utility Flight, Weather Station; the 128th Aircraft Control and Warning Squadron; and Detachment A, 228th Service Group. The 128th Fighter Group included the 126th Fighter Squadron, based in Milwaukee, and the 176th Fighter Squadron, based in Madison.

The 128th Fighter Group launched with P-51 Mustangs, and would later fly the F-80, F-86 and F-89 jet fighter aircraft as well as redesignated as the 128th Fighter Interceptor Group. The 128th was activated for the Korean War and served on active duty for 21 months. In August 1961 the unit was redesignated as the 128th Air Refueling Group and fielded the KC-97 refueler. It became the first Air National Guard refueling wing to become fully operational in December 1963. The unit received its first KC-135 refuelers in December 1977. In October 1995, the 128th was redesignated as the 128th Air Refueling Wing.

In the U.S. Air Force, a Wing is a unit with a distinct mission that has significant scope. In the case of the 128th Air Refueling Wing, it has an operations group and maintains an air base at Mitchell Field in Milwaukee. A group is an organization one level lower than a wing, and squadrons are the next command level below groups.

Over the years the unit demonstrated its proficiency and dedication to excellence through exercises and real-world missions, having earned the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award nine times since 1967. It served in Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm — first in a volunteer status, then in a partial activation. Its deployment schedule greatly increased during the Global War on Terror, supporting multiple missions for Operation Noble Eagle, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Members of the 128th has also served in support of Wisconsin’s COVID-19 response, civil support and Operation Allies Welcome.

“Over the past 75 years the 128th Air Refueling Wing has operated under different names, aircraft and mission sets while serving our state and nation at home and abroad,” said Col. Adria Zuccaro, 128th commander. “No matter the destination, our Airmen have served with dignity and pride, which is the foundation of our

success and the reason we will continue to achieve greatness in the future.”