

The North Dakota Air National Guard wing has moved on to new aircraft, but it won't soon forget its F-16s.



The Hooligan Trade

Photography by Rick Linares and USAF photographers





Airpower on the northern Great Plains has entered a new era. Here, the North Dakota ANG's first C-21 (piloted by Lt. Col. Craig Schroeder and Maj. Jon Wutzke) nears Fargo on January 10 and is joined by one of NDANG's last F-16s (flown by Capt. Stephanie Kelsen). The moment was symbolic for the 119th Fighter Wing—the "Happy Hooligans." The unit traded out its fighters for C-21s and UAVs, becoming the 119th Wing in a restructured Air Force.

For the North Dakota ANG, fighters were a big deal for a long time—60 years. The 119th FW—the Happy Hooligans—mobilized for Korea. More recently, they rushed to Washington, D.C., to fly combat air patrols on Sept. 11, 2001. Alert Det. 1, an F-16 unit at Langley AFB, Va., supported domestic air patrols. Now, though, the wing's F-16s are gone; the 119th flew its final F-16 missions one year ago, and the last fighter departed in early 2007. Since then, the wing has acquired eight C-21 transports and has begun operating MQ-1 Predator UAVs. Clearly, the Hooligans are going through radical cultural change.

[1] The very last Hooligan F-16 fighter revs up to depart Fargo on Jan. 30. Piloting the fighter is Capt. Ryan Rastedt.



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[2] Maj. Steve Watson prepares for one last F-16 training flight. Watson now flies the Predator. [3] In April, MSgt. Jeffery Lien, 119th Maintenance Squadron, spray-paints the Hooligan tail flash on one of the wing's new C-21 transports. [4] MQ-1 Predators such as this one in Iraq are flown by former Hooligan fighter pilots. This UAV is tended by General Atomics Aeronautical Systems mechanic Bruce Ottenwess.



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USAF photo by SMSgt. David Lipp

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[1] A C-21, piloted by Wutzke, takes off on March 16 from Hector Airport in Fargo. [2] MQ-1 Predators, such as this one at Creech AFB, Nev., perform interdiction and reconnaissance missions, and are armed, medium-altitude, long-endurance UAVs. [3] In the final fighter deployment, an F-16 cozies up to an air tanker of the 459th ARW, a Reserve unit at Andrews AFB, Md. [4] A 119th airman checks an AIM-9 Sidewinder on a Hooligan F-16. [5] An F-16A heads out on a training mission, one of the last, off the coast of Virginia. The 119th FW also flew the two-seat F-16B.



USAF photo by SSgt. Brian Ferguson

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Provisions of the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure law and new Total Force initiatives have had a dramatic impact on the 119th. It is a serious contender to be the first recipient of the Joint Cargo Aircraft. Its pilots already are flying UAVs. Moreover, the 119th activated the Guard's largest security forces squadron.

[1] Col. Robert Becklund, the wing commander, noses up his C-21 in a March 19 flight. [2] In the old Alert Det. 1 at Langley AFB, Va., enlisted airmen such as SSgt. Ryan C. Hehr, pictured here, provided the indispensable support and maintenance. [3] (L-r) SSgt. Joshua Gonser, TSgt. James Kemmer, SSgt. Timothy Eraker, and SSgt. Jeffery Jacobson perform a C-21 aircraft phase inspection.

USAF photo by SMSgt. David Lipp



USAF photo by SSgt. Michael Holzworth



[4] Two F-16s perform a scissor break over the Atlantic. For the most part, the F-16 pilots have stayed on for new missions. [5] The preflight done, an MQ-1 Predator in Iraq readies for takeoff. Control of Predator UAVs will be by Hooligans deployed to Nevada or in North Dakota.

and their crews and support personnel to Iceland, where the Hooligans intercepted eight Russian Tu-95 bombers. In 1986, the unit became the first to assume USAFE's Zulu alert mission at Ramstein AB, Germany, providing continuous alert in Europe.

The Happy Hooligans have a long history of innovation and adaptation. In 1984, the 119th deployed six F-4s



The Hooligans first flew the P-51 Mustang in 1947 and have operated many types of fighters since then. After the Mustang was phased out in 1954, the Hooligan pilots flew the F-94, F-89, F-102, F-101, F-4D, and, finally, the F-16, starting in 1990.

[1] TSgt. Christopher Plath (l) and TSgt. Nathan Nerby carefully preflight this F-16 before a mission.

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USAF photo by Maj. David Kurie

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[2] The top missions of the MQ-1 (here returning to an airfield in Afghanistan) are interdiction and armed reconnaissance against critical and fleeting targets. [3] Four antenna, or "bird slicers," in front of the canopy glass were part of the F-16's IFF avionics. [4] Two 119th Wing airmen, TSgt. Charles Welle and SSgt. Mathew Andvik, swap out a C-21 engine.

The 119th FW's alert detachment at Langley AFB, Va., conducted its formal deactivation ceremony on Oct. 12, 2006. Most of the unit's aircraft were sent to the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center, Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz.



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The wing achieved a still-unparalleled flying safety record, compiling more than 144,000 flight hours without a Class A mishap.

[1] With the "Happy Hooligans" moniker proudly displayed upon their tails, NDANG F-16s execute a formation turn. Though the fighters are gone, some aspects of the fighter era live on.



USAF photo by SMSgt. David Lipp



USAF photo

[2] Under the 119th structure, the 177th Airlift Squadron operates the C-21, which provides operational support assistance and responsive aeromedical airlift services. [3] At the end of the day, a pair of Happy Hooligan Vipers soars above a sun-drenched Atlantic Ocean. [4] MQ-1 Predators of this type, when they arrive, will fall under the 178th Reconnaissance Squadron.

In their now-bygone fighter days, the Hooligans amassed many accolades for superior performance. They won the Air Force Outstanding Unit award 11 times, the William Tell top award three times, and the Hughes Trophy twice. The wing's leadership says it is committed to producing the same excellence in the new era. ■