

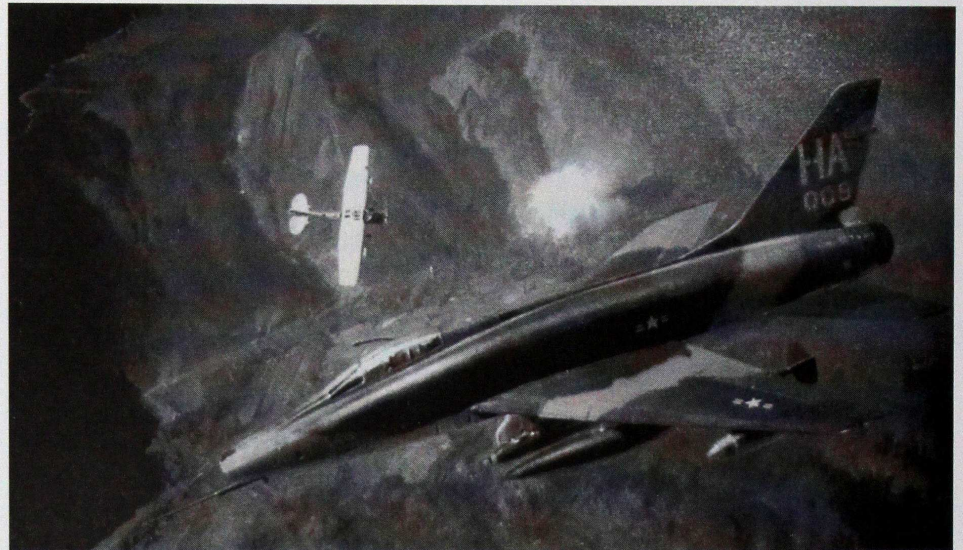
Wilson Hurley's Vietnam

by Ann L. Cooper
with Wilson Hurley

The Air National Guard did not become a separate part of the U. S. Air Force until 1947, yet aviators of the United States National Guard have performed significantly in all major US wars and conflicts since the beginning of the 20th Century. Their history traces to the 1st Aero Company of the New York National Guard, now recognized as the oldest Air National Guard Unit.

The 1st Aero Squadron, still in operation today as the 102nd Rescue Squadron of the New York Air National Guard (NYANG), had its inception in November 1915 under the command of Captain Raynel C. Bolling. The unit was mobilized on 13 July 1916 during the border crisis with Mexico that pitted General John "Black Jack" Pershing against Mexico's Francisco "Pancho" Villa. On 9 March 1916, Villa attacked the border town of Columbus, New Mexico. Eighteen U.S. citizens were killed and several buildings were burned before the US Cavalry, led by Major Frank Tompkins, pressed a counterattack. Pershing then led a year-long punitive expedition along the Mexican border to search for Villa and his mounted band. This marked the last major campaign of US Cavalry – The Horse Soldiers – and the first major campaign of National Guard aviators in their Curtiss JN-2 "Jennys."

During World War I, individual volunteers from the National Guard provided a major pool of aviators for the U.S. Army. Required to leave the Guard and become members of the Signal Corps Reserve in order to fly, many complied and some played prominent



Wilson Hurley's painting titled, "Air Strike in Happy Valley," as displayed in Kettering Hall in the US Air Force Museum (Cooper/Hurley)

roles. At least four became aces and one, Lieutenant Erwin R. Bleckley of Kansas, was awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously for heroism as an aerial observer. Tennessee Guardsman Reed Chambers flew with the 94th Aero Squadron, the famed "Hat-in-the-Ring" Squadron, from Villeneuve, France on the first combat mission of a squadron of US pilots ordered by an American commander.

World War II brought nearly 5,000 experienced National Guard aviators and support personnel into combat. By V-J day, some National Guard units had been disbanded or inactivated, but the remaining units were transferred from observation into reconnaissance, liaison, fighter, and bombardment squadrons. Guardsmen served in every major combat theater of WWII and proved their worth as part of the total fighting forces.

In 1947, the Air National Guard (ANG) became a separate part of the United States Air Force and, during the Korean War, seized an opportunity to come into its own. Eighty percent of the Air Guard, 45,000 Air Guardsmen, responded

to a call to serve, including 66 of the Guard's 92 flying squadrons. Becoming combat ready was a challenge to some of those units, but their eventual contributions led senior ANG and USAF leaders to commit to building the Air Guard as an effective reserve component, a key part of the total force.

It was on 23 January 1968, in the midst of the war in Vietnam and in response to the seizing of the USS *Pueblo* by North Koreans that President Lyndon B. Johnson ordered the activation of a limited number of reserve units. The ANG immediately called 9,343 personnel with a resulting 95 percent responding in their respective units – eight tactical fighter groups, three tactical reconnaissance groups, and three wing headquarters.

The following month's punishing thrust of the communists' Tet Offensive led to another mobilization ordered by President Johnson in February 1968. A third "call-up" of 1,333 Air Guardsmen, including two tactical fighter groups and a medical evacuation unit, occurred on 13 May. Those two fighter groups,

flying F-86Hs, were sent to Cannon AFB, New Mexico, to train Air Force pilots as forward air controllers (FAC) and combat crewmembers. Also in May, the 120th Tactical Fighter Squadron (TFS) from Colorado sent its F-100s to Phan Rang Air Base. The Iowa 174th TFS, New York's 136th TFS, and New Mexico's 188th TFS also took their F-100s to Vietnam and all were integrated into US Air Force combat operations engaged in stemming communist advances in Southeast Asia. According to ANG historian, Charles J. Gross PhD, prior to their return home in April 1969, they flew 24,124 sorties and 38,614 combat hours.

Among the responding Guardsmen was Wilson Hurley, a member of the 188th Tactical Fighter Squadron of the 140th Tactical Fighter Group, New Mexico Air National Guard. He was returned to active duty as a major during his unit's recall, January 1968.

Wilson Hurley, who is known as a "Landscape of Grandeur" and who is widely recognized as one of the foremost landscape painters in the United States, practiced his art as he simultaneously pursued other careers – the law, banking, and military flying. He was born one of four children and the only son of Ruth and Patrick J. Hurley. His father, Patrick, was appointed to President Herbert Hoover's cabinet in the late 1920s and served the United States with distinction as the Secretary of War. His mother, Ruth, responded to a youthful Wilson's interest in art and, during the family's summers in New Mexico, saw to it that he was exposed to Santa Fe artists Theodore Van Soelen and Joe Bakos and Taos artist John Young-Hunter. Hurley received outstanding

grounding in fine art as well as an appreciation of commitment of service to his country.

A graduate of West Point and of law school, Hurley served on active military duty and followed that stint by serving in the New Mexico Air National Guard. In May 1968, his squadron was assigned to Tuy Hoa Air Base, South Vietnam, but Hurley was sent to Phan Rang Air Base for training as a forward air controller (FAC). His instruction completed by December 1968, he was assigned to fly single-engine Cessna O-1 "Bird Dog" observation planes. Interestingly, he was assigned as a FAC for the First Regiment of the Republic of Korea's "Capital" Division, flying from air bases at Qui Nhon and Phu Cat. He returned to the U.S. with the 188th Tactical Fighter Squadron, in May 1969.

Hurley is highly adept at conceptualizing and memorizing the world about him and expertly

depicting those scenes on canvas. He brought back from the grueling conflict a series of remembered scenes of his wartime experiences.

His are acute powers of observation. With no photographic record and no physical images to enhance his memory, he depicted his recollections for posterity. He later transferred those images from his memory to significant oil paintings that captured much more than historical depiction. His resulting series of paintings, captioned in his own words, maintained intact and permanently donated by the artist to the United States Air Force Museum, Dayton, Ohio, is of historic importance. Hurley, with his prodigious artistic talent and keen intelligence, has created a memorable group of paintings that invite his viewers to participate - to feel and to embrace the conflicting emotions of bitter hostilities in an otherwise enchanting locale. ☼

A security policeman sitting in a gazebo in Vietnam is the subject of another Wilson Hurley painting titled, "Sentry." (Cooper/Hurley)



[To the right are additional Wilson Hurley paintings. These paintings are currently displayed in the Kettering Hall of the US Air Force Museum. Ed.]