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Budget cuts end 72 years of manned flights for Iowa Air Guard

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Written by Sharyn Jackson

As three fighter jets circled the Iowa Air National Guard's 132nd Fighter Wing one last time, their familiar rumble was replaced by the sounds of an electric guitar, then a collective laugh from those watching below. The "Top Gun" theme song blared over the loudspeaker, as more than a thousand active and former members of the wing commemorated the last training flight of the F-16s.

After 72 years, the 132nd ended its manned flight operations Saturday, a result of defense cuts made by Congress last year. The unit's 21 F-16 aircraft will move to an Air National Guard fighter wing in Atlantic City, N.J., and 30 percent of the 1,002-member unit will lose their jobs. The rest of the airmen will transition into new roles operating remotely controlled unmanned aircraft, commonly

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Iowa F-16's get 'Top Gun' farewell flight: On Saturday, Sept. 7, the 132nd Fighter Wing, Iowa Air National Guard held a ceremony to mark a transition from manned aircraft to remotely piloted aircraft. Three F-16's performed a fly-over as the theme from 'Top Gun' amplified across the airfield.



Members of the Honor Guard of the 132nd Fighter Wing of the Iowa Air National Guard proceed through a hangar after presenting colors at a ceremony on Saturday marking the end of manned flights for the Des Moines unit. / Charlie Litchfield/The Register



Retired Master Sgt. Richard Swenson proudly sports a hat representing the Iowa Air Guard's 132nd Fighter Wing. / Charlie Litchfield/The Register



The 132nd Fighter Wing's patch adorns the shoulder of one of its members. / Charlie Litchfield/ The Register

known as drones, and providing cybersecurity and military intelligence services.

A ceremony at once joyful and melancholy marked the last of the F-16s' training flights in Iowa.

"I feel like I'm at a funeral this afternoon," said Howard Miner of West Des Moines. Miner started working for the Guard in August of 1948 and at one time was in charge of all the airplanes on the flight line. He served 32 years in the Iowa Air National Guard.

"I hate to see them go," Miner said. "It's been the biggest part of my life."

U.S. Rep. Tom Latham, R-Clive, fought in Congress to keep the 132nd's current mission.

"Obviously this is a day that we really didn't want to see happen," Latham told the airmen. "But it is also a day of great opportunity," with the new missions, "to be viable for many, many years here."

Lt. Gov. Kim Reynolds evoked the ever-present reverberations of the F-16s, which she called "a staple in our community and in our national defense strategy."

"I know that I speak for all lowans when I say I'm going to miss the roaring sound of an F-16 flying low on a summer day," she said.

For retirees, that sound remained a link to their former roles. Rob Maroc, 49, retired as a jet engine mechanic exactly one year ago to the day of the ceremony. Living eight miles from the fighter wing, he said he could hear the jets every time they took off.

"It's a reassuring sound to me, that we have them here and this great group of people are supporting them and doing their part protecting the country," Maroc said. "To have them leave the flying business at the top of their game, it's a shame."

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An F-16 makes a final, low pass overhead on Saturday in Des Moines. / Charlie Litchfield/ The Register

The transition will make way for maintenance workers, like Master Sgt. Jay Sebben, 36, to learn new skills. Sebben, who has spent half his life with the Air National Guard, will go from looking for defects in the F-16s to working on computers with remotely piloted aircraft. He will spend four months training in Mississippi this winter.

“It is a little sad to see the aircraft leave,” said Sebben, whose father retired from the

same unit.

“There’s history out here with my family,” he said. “But I’m excited to embrace this new unit.”

Wendell Starmer, 62, joined the unit in 1970, retiring as an airfield management superintendent in 2006. He said he had “mixed feelings” about the change for the unit, but at the same time, he felt that the pride of having been a part of it would endure.

“It was the best career I ever had,” Starmer said. “It’s a family. It’s like a fraternity. Everybody supports each other. Once you belong to the unit, you’re pretty much a part of the unit the rest of your life.”

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