

OP-ED

by

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## **MANG is more than F-15's**

When you think of the Montana Air National Guard (MANG), you think of the sound of freedom they bring with the F-15's flying over our community. They are beautiful to watch, but we often do not think of what else they bring. We have all heard about MANG's economic impact (about 10% - 12% of our local economy), which is significant. But that really isn't the whole story.

We need to remember that the personnel at MANG are people with jobs, about 900 of them. We know they are an integral part of our national security that helps preserve the freedoms we enjoy. But they are also our neighbors who live, work, play and pray with us. Yes, they put on their uniforms and can leave in support of a mission at any time. When they do, they leave behind husbands, wives, children, family and friends to carry on while they worry about their safety. They also don't work Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Their shifts vary and are often long and stressful when you consider the responsibilities that are associated with their daily duties. Even with this, they still find time to volunteer in our community at churches, in our schools, with numerous non-profit organizations and more.

MANG is and has been a part of our Great Falls family for a very long time. So when the Central Montana Defense Alliance (CMDA) sees we may lose 200 or more jobs because the Department of Defense changes on how to restructure our armed forces, we get concerned. Not because we love the F-15's (which we do), not because we need the C-27J flying mission (which we do), but because it has a direct impact on the lives and welfare of those who serve us so proudly. We need to remember these things while the CMDA continues to fight for missions to keep jobs at the MANG.

The CMDA is in constant contact with MANG leadership, the Governor's office and our congressional representatives and Pentagon leadership to determine what missions and/or companion missions would be a good fit for the valuable resources we have available. We are the preferred location for the C-27J. But we are also looking at remote piloted aircraft (RPA). RPA's are the next generation of aircraft to meet future needs. We are promoting the Smokey buys and Guard flies C-130 water bombers, and we have not given up on the F-15 mission. We look at the \$66 million dollar bill to move the F-15's to California and the loss of mission capability while they get qualified and that does not make good business sense during this time of economic challenges for the Department of Defense or our nation.

The bottom line is the MANG mission is vitally important. But regardless of what kind of mission it is, the people are our greatest assets and it is their jobs we are fighting to keep.

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