

# The Bolivian Air Force in its 96 Years

Serving since 12 October 1923

WILFREDO VISCAFÉ PAREDES, MAJ GEN AVIATION,  
BOLIVIAN AIR FORCE

Beginning in 1913, prominent foreign and Bolivian aviators unsuccessfully tried to take flight on the high plateau of the city of El Alto at 3,800 meters above sea level. They all failed due to the weak engine power of airplanes at the time, which proved insufficient to counteract the extreme high-altitude atmospheric conditions in which our main cities are located. However, on 17 April 1920, American aviator Donald Hudson, aboard a 500HP Curtiss “Wasp” triplane, managed to cross the skies of the city of La Paz, successfully making the historic first flight in Bolivia.

## *First Hangars*

In the early 1920s, the Wasp arrived at El Alto, through the port of Arica, for which the construction of a hangar and an airstrip for its assembly, storage, and operation was approved. Under the command of military engineer Lt Col Meredia Villarreal, a group of workers and soldiers proceeded to build the airstrip and an adobe and calamine shed, which was to become the first hangar of Bolivian aviation. In 1925, in front of this historic hangar, the construction of four new and larger cement hangars began, which, when completed in 1926, transformed the El Alto airfield into the model of a true military air base, providing functionality and comfort to our military aviation enthusiasts. With this effort, squadrons of airplanes acquired for the Chaco War were adequately preserved under their roofs, which gave them a longer lifespan, since most were constructed of fabric and wood.

## *Aviation School*

During the presidency of Dr. Bautista Saavedra, on 12 October 1923, a longed-for Aviation School was solemnly founded on the plains of El Alto de La Paz, as another weapon of our Army. Its main mission was to train our country’s civilian and military aviators. For this reason, that historic date has been commemorated until this day as the “Anniversary of the Air Force and National Aeronautics Day.”

## *Chaco War*

In July 1932, at the beginning of the Chaco War, the Military Aviation School, with all its personnel, flight equipment, and support equipment, was mobilized to the wartime area of operations, where it had an intense and heroic performance. In glorious actions of reconnaissance, exploration, bombardment, and machine-gunning, the pilots and their equipment optimally contributed to the tactical and strategic opera-

tions of our Army's campaign. In spectacular aerial combat, they managed to shoot down several adversary airplanes. Standing out among the airmen piloting these aircraft was Maj Rafael Pabón (winner of the first air combat in the Americas).

### ***Military Aviation College***

A long-cherished desire of the Bolivian Military Aviation cadre was to have an officer training institute, like that of other countries of the continent. After long concerted efforts from both the Gen Staff of the Army and Executive branch itself, in a solemn act carried out on the grounds of Air Base No. 3 in the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, the Military Aviation College (COLMILAV) was officially founded on 31 May 1952. The following year the college was named after Lt Gen Germán Busch, as a posthumous tribute to the legendary hero of the Chaco War and notable former President of the Republic. The first COLMILAV Commander was Lt Col (Aviation) Desiderio Carrasco Valverde.

### ***Bolivian Air Force (FAB)***

In the FAB, the most important historical event of Bolivian aeronautics was the foundation of its Military Aviation School in 1923, which kept on top of all the advances that Bolivian Military Aviation was experiencing as it built basic infrastructure and acquired aeronautical equipment to efficiently fulfill its assigned mission.

Because of the importance played by military aviation and its increased growth, technical capability, and historical role as the principal component of our national airpower, it became essential to create a hierarchical structure for its force management. Therefore, during the first government of Dr. Hernán Siles Zuazo, on 26 September 1957, by Supreme Decree No. 04743, the Gen Command of the FAB was created, which amounted to the birth of a new military institution, at the same level and parallel to the National Army.

The nation and its institutions have in their history personalities who wrote great ideals—visionary men, with great values and principles, who traced new horizons. In the case of our Air Force, it was the first commander of the FAB, Maj Gen Walter Arze Rojas, who was then followed by other true leaders such as Maj Gen (Aviation) Oscar Adriazola Valda, Gen of the Air Force Guillermo Escobar Uhry, Gen of the Air Force Fernando Sanjinez Yañez, and other prominent military aviators, whose work demonstrated true conviction and vocation of service to the homeland. These officers became the models/prototypes of leaders who succeeded and achieved great success, setting an example and testimony of true military honor: knights of the air.

With its mission to provide airspace dominance and to drive the development of the nation's aerospace power, taking into account new challenges and late breaking technological developments, the FAB is currently the decisive factor in our security, aerospace defense, and national integrity; with state-of-the-art equipment and highly trained human resources, a modern organization adapting in these times of change and establishing itself in the safeguarding of our national territory.

### *Aerospace Museum (2015)*

Every state and institution, since the time of their creation and development, writes their own history, starring great visionary men who thought about the future. As author José Ortega y Gasset wrote, “It is only possible to advance when you look far, you can only progress when you think big.”

The FAB, in recent years, has implemented transcendental changes both in its organizational structure and in the preservation of its origins. One of these was the creation of the Aerospace Museum of the FAB, which protects and conserves our air and space history, as part of the heritage of the Bolivian State. This wonderful project came to fruition thanks to the commitment and the weighted effort of commissioned and noncommissioned officers who worked on the restoration of aircraft from our First Air Brigade. As our hymns expresses:

*To the north and the south, the air force arrived . . . embracing lighted peaks and challenging death when flying, a steel ship is seen, the blue of your sky traversing . . . Noble wings Bolivia gives you . . . Aviation that will die for you as the national propulsion of progress in peace.*

Thus, throughout its history, the FAB has established itself as the elite force, heritage and pride of the Bolivian State, and as a just recognition of the 96th anniversary of its creation, with the characteristic premise of military airmen, which have the privilege and honor of belonging to a great institution that gives us the opportunity to have a little piece of heaven, we give glory to the crew that offered their lives in service to our country and ask our divine Creator to bless all the members of this great aeronautical family on this momentous date. □



**Major General (Aviation) Wilfredo Viscafé Paredes**

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