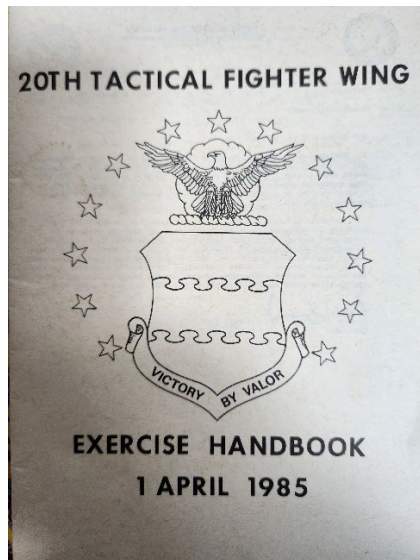


20<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing Association

# Newsletter



1 March 2024



Welcome all ranks and AFSC's



# *The purpose of the Association*

*To preserve the military history and foster esprit de corps of past and present members of the 20th Fighter Wing and all previous and subsequent military iterations of that organization. Membership in the Association will be open to past and present members of the 20th Fighter Wing, their spouses and such other persons who have an interest in the affairs of the Association.*

## *2022/2023 Board Members*

Gino Passaro – President      Steve Homoki – Vice President  
Dave Roberts – Chaplain      Ron Obernier – Secretary  
Art Sevigny – Historian      Missi Zender-Sakach – Treasurer  
Steve Brown – 2025 Reunion  
**??????????? – 2027 Reunion**  
Missi Zender-Sakach – Past Reunion Chair

## *New Members Since December Newsletter*

Sgt Richard Daw. Rich was a member of the 20th FW at Upper Heyford and was assigned to the 20th FMS/EMS from 1981-83. He maintained the F-111E.

**Somewhat disappointing with only one new member joining in these past few months. I need your help to recruit your friends who are not members, especially those from the F-16 alumni. The future of the Association is reliant on a robust membership.**

**If I have missed anyone this time round, please let me know so that I can include them in the next newsletter.**

## *Fallen Heros*



**This Listing contains only those warriors identified to the Association since the last newsletter.**

**Lieutenant Colonel John R Walters** served the United States Air Force in many capacities during his career and the 20thTFW, 77th Fighter Squadron, at RAF Wethersfield during the years 1965-1968. He flew 700+ combat hours in the F-100 and F-4 aircraft. John was credited with flying the first and last combat mission of the Vietnam war (9 years apart). He was a long-time member of the Association.



**Major William "Bill" Avery Fairfax Jr** served as a Weapon Systems Officer in the F-111A and was a combat veteran of the Vietnam War. He served at RAF Upper Heyford with the 20<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing from 1974 to 1979 and again from 1984 to 1987. He was a member of the 79 TFS and Wing Stan/Eval. He was a long-time member of the Association.



**Robert C. Brinker** served in the 20thTFW at Wethersfield during the years 1955-58. He was a member of the 79 TFS. He flew the F-100. He was a long-time member of the Association. Bob was 92 years old.



**Colonel Raymond "Jack" Bartholomew** was the CC of the 77th TFS during his tour at RAF Upper Heyford from 1982 - 1984. He flew the F-111 and was a true pioneer. Jack was a long-time member of the Association and was 81 years old. Jack did not have email, but cards can be sent to Julia Bartholomew, 9713 Old Rout 22, Breingsville, PA 18031.

## ***A bit of History by Art Seigny***

### **77<sup>th</sup> Fighter Squadron Goes Hunting**

The 20th Fighter Group had not flown on a mission in three days due to poor weather. On February 9, 1945, the weather had improved, and the 20th Fighter Group's mission was to escort 3rd and 4th combat group B- 17s of the 1st Division hitting oil refineries at Lutzkendorf, Germany.

During the morning briefing Col Russell Gustke, 20th FG Deputy Commander and former 77th FS Commander briefed that the 77th would be released, after the bombers reached the target, to hit the deck and strafe targets of opportunity.

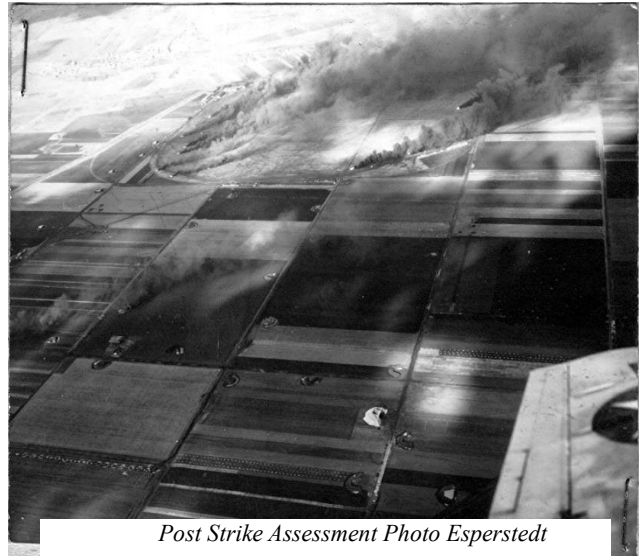
At this point in the war the Luftwaffe was being very selective on challenging the bombers depending on their predicted target. 8th Air Force was hot to destroy the Luftwaffe's combat capability and encouraged fighters to hit the deck to seek out the Luftwaffe at their bases. To sweeten the deal, 8th Air Force approved awarding claims for strafing toward achieving "Ace" status. \* This change in policy

bore fruit as we will see but also resulted in increased losses to ground fire.

Following the mission briefing, 77th Operations Officer Major Merle J. Gilbertson "Jakie" met with his pilots back at the squadron to work out what tactics would be employed. The squadron took off at 1017 hrs. and rendezvoused with the bombers at 1115 hrs. at 23000 feet. The escort was uneventful, but that was about to change. At 1300 hrs. the squadron broke off to go hunting and to quote from the 77th's history report at the time "the fun began."

Jakie dove for the deck with fifteen very eager pilots in tow. Once on the deck the squadron broke into flights and started the hunt. Just east of Esperstedt airfield, in the Merseberg-Mulhausen area of Germany, Jakie, leading White Flight found a locomotive pulling over twenty railcars. On the first pass the boiler on the locomotive blew up followed by a few more passes on the cars. As it turned out this was just an appetizer. Lt Larson "New Orleans Kid" from Red Flight came across Esperstedt airfield with over eighty aircraft dispersed consisting of mostly brand new FW190s. These aircraft were scattered all over the airfield in hangers, revetments and out in the open.

The call went out for the remaining flights to join in on the fun. At first it was a complete free-for-all with attacks coming in from all directions and this resulted in utter chaos. Smoke from burning aircraft obscured the target and the attacking aircraft demanded a more structured attack. Jakie called for a left-hand pattern and the pilots quickly complied with the carnage continuing. The 20th FW Association archives contain gun footage from this attack.



*Post Strike Assessment Photo Esperstedt*

The attack continued for approximately 20 minutes until the ammo ran out. By the time the Gamblers were done, thirty-nine aircraft were destroyed and five damaged in addition to the damage to various facilities on the base.

On the way out the Germans vectored in 15-plus Bf109s followed by another twelve. With their ammo almost exhausted, the 77th still managed to dispatch two more and one probable.

During the attack, Jakie had the front half of his canopy blown off from an exploding Bf109 he was strafing taking debris in the face which earned him a Purple Heart. The day was not without loss though. Lt. Julio Nuno in Blue Flight failed to return and was believed lost during the encounter with the 109s.



*Major Merle J. Gilbertson "Jacie"*

As a result of this mission, the 77th set the record, at the time, for the most enemy aircraft destroyed by a squadron during a

single mission. This put the 77th in first place within the 20 FG and moved the 20FG's standing in the 8 AF from 12th to 8th.



**Lt. Reys Jones' attack on a FW190**

The screen shot above is from Reys Jones' attack. The insert photo of Jones with that expression matches the kind of flying you would expect from him, and his gun film bears that out. When Jones had finished, his ammo was exhausted and he had destroyed five aircraft, two of which were inside a hangar.

\*"Eighth was the only numbered air force to count ground kills, and the Air Force subsequently limited its official recognition.

# 20<sup>th</sup> Fighter Wing News

## Bamboo Eagle

The 79th Fighter and Fighter Generation Squadron "Tigers" forward deployed directly from Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, to March Air Reserve Base, California, to participate in the first iteration of Bamboo Eagle (BE) alongside sister branches and allied nations Jan. 29- Feb. 2, 2024.

The Tigers participated in BE 24-1 to test their ability to quickly assemble light and lean deployment packages, forward deploy and project airpower forward across great distances alongside U.S. and allied forces, putting a premium on global readiness for the future of warfare.

Joining the F-16 Viper team were the New Hampshire Air National Guard's KC-46A tankers, the Vermont Air National Guard F-15 Eagle, the KC-135 Demo Team from Fairchild Air Force Base, the U.S. Special Operations Command Pura Commandos, aerobatic pilot Rob Holland, the N.H. Army Guard UH-60 Blackhawk, aerobatic pilot Kent Pietsch, the P-51C "Mad Max" with pilot Lou Horschel and the Smoke-N-Thunder Jet Truck.

The 20th Security Forces Squadron provided around-the-clock security on the flightline for 79th Fighter Squadron aircraft during Bamboo Eagle 24-1 ensuring exercise operations can be executed effectively without interruption.





## MQ9 Reaper lands at Shaw AFB

A U.S. Air Force MQ-9 Reaper assigned to [March Air Reserve Base](#) landed for the first time at Shaw Air Force Base yesterday.

This aircraft was remotely piloted by members of the 25th Attack Group who operate out of Shaw daily, providing 24-hour air support to missions worldwide across four Combatant Commands. This historic operation demonstrated innovative maintenance advancements and showcased the 25th Attack Group's Satellite Launch and Recovery capabilities.



## *From our Members*

Early 70s Upper Heyford



*Mike Rooney*



*Pat Barron*

***From Ron Levy:***

Here is a picture of the license plate on my new Mustang and one of me with my Grumman Tiger in 77<sup>th</sup> TFS colors. And if anyone is interested in what Ron Levy is doing these days, I am an instructor at Flight Safety's Wilmington DE Learning Center teaching the Bombardier Challenger 300, and Fran's still writing.



**Joe Peterburs had his 99th birthday on 25 November 2023  
Happy Belated Birthday Joe!**





### **Lieutenant Joe Peterburs 20th FG, 55 FS Kings Cliffe Memories**

The first 8 to 10 days after my arrival at Kings Cliffe were primarily occupied with administrative and functional activities like learning the layout of the Station, defensive procedures/rules (there were still Luftwaffe intrusions and on one occasion the Group scrambled a flight against one), Squadron assignment, issuance of equipment and assignment of quarters. The “quarters” consisted of a standard U S Army barracks. One small room at one end (assigned to ranking officer), an open bay and at the other end a communal latrine. I believe there were between 16 and 20 bunks with 8 to 10 on either side of the bay and about five feet between bunks. Your footlocker, which contained most of your valuables, was at the foot of the bunk and a standing wall locker at the head and side of the bunk. It sure was cozy and you got to know each other very well under these conditions. There was a separate large building that held about fifteen bathtubs. Showers were not in vogue then, particularly in England, so if you were lucky, you would be able to take a bath about once a week. I believe we had to schedule a bath way ahead of time and even then, it was not sure you would get it. The 8 to 10 settling in days included combat indoctrination training. We learned about the P-51, its characteristics and our tactics and procedures for escort, air to air combat and ground support/strafing missions. We reviewed the enemy terrain and its known defenses as well as the Luftwaffe’s aircraft and their individual strengths and weaknesses, tactics, and locations. Following combat indoctrination, we started our check out in the P-51. It was the same routine we did in checking out in the P-40 i.e., read the manual, familiarize yourself with the cockpit, hop in, start the engine and off you go. After a couple of familiarization flights, we started to practice combat escort and ground attack formation flying, procedures and tactics. We did some navigation training and a bit of aerobatics over the Wash. Separate from the actual flying training we did a lot of Link trainer instrument flying training. Link training was a continuing thing with a required 4 hours a month in the Link. There was no gunnery involved in the training, however, fortunately during RTU we received live aerial and ground gunnery, bombing and spraying as well as air to air dog fights with other P-51 and P-40 units while training in Florida. I did my initial check out in the P-51B with most of my training time in the P-51C and then the P-51D. I cannot

remember the major differences in the models; however, I am sure there were. The B and C models that I flew were converted from the “raiser” back to what we called the “Spitfire” canopy. This was a bubble like the D models and provided superior visibility. After about 20 hours I flew my first combat mission in a P51C. Our flying clothing was not standardized and only the essentials. We were issued our helmet with Ox mask and goggles as well as a wool flying suit, leather flying jacket and wool gloves. Some of the equipment was from the RAF. My flying goggles were RAF split glass type, and my gloves were RAF fleece lined leather. Some would fly in their uniform under the flight suit. We wore our own civilian shoes (mostly oxfords), however many of us would buy our own boots. In fact, I had just ordered a pair of handmade boots a couple of weeks before I was shot down; picked them up after I was repatriated. As far as leisure time there really was not much of it. My longest combat day was 9 hours and 45 minutes of combat flying (2 missions) and my average time per mission was 5.5 hours. Add to that 2 hours of prep time and 1.5 hours debrief time and the day is pretty well shot.

**From Glenn Harmon:** A few photos I took while stationed at RAF Upper Heyford from 1978-1983.

55TFS TDY to Moron, Spain circa 1979. Advance team and maintenance support had arrived earlier. This photo is the arrival of the F-111 aircraft and crews at Moron Air Base. From left to right in uniform; Major Pete Daily, Lt. Col. Sid Dodd, 55TFS Squadron Commander, and Major Judd Barnes with crew chiefs in background. Pete is greeting everyone with cold beverages to boost morale!

Lt. Col. Sid Dodd, 55TFS Squadron Commander and 1LT Andy Wright conduct a “Friday debrief session” at our favorite watering hole, Jandy’s Pub.

Star of the Show: The addition of the NATO hardened shelters in the eighty’s at Upper Heyford greatly enhanced the quality of life for aircrews, maintenance personnel and gave us a nice dry place to preflight the aircraft for launch.





**From Ken Kerwin:** The 79th TFS F100Ds in early 1962.



**From Jerry Fetter:** (Editor's comment) A big thanks to Jerry and Chris Thompson for getting our 2022 award plaques completed and presented to the Wing!



Aerial Achievement: Capt. Taylor Ham; Force Multiplier: MSgt Daryl Tigert; and Base Support Enhancement Award: Ms Sabrina Bowser

**From Nick Forder 20<sup>th</sup> Heritage Manager:** Information regarding the status of the Weathersfield Heritage Group. Nick has agreed with Ross that they will arrange a meeting after Easter to discuss how they might work together to keep the Wethersfield 20<sup>th</sup> TFW collections together.

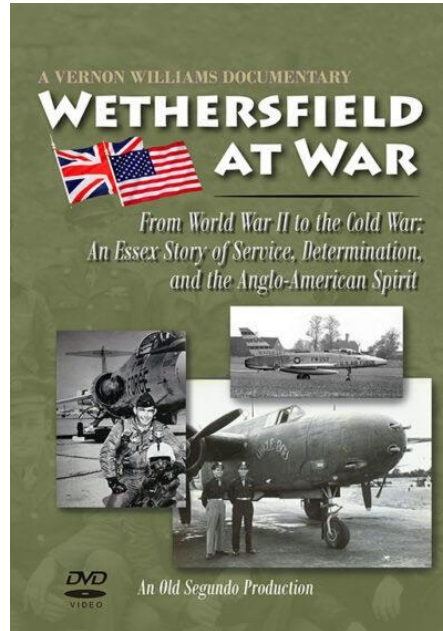


It is now nearly two years since the museum was given notice to leave RAF Wethersfield - thankfully two local property owners have given us storage space during this time. However, it is now clear that without support from the Home Secretary, Home Office, Braintree District Council or Essex County Council and no affordable land or building available in the local vicinity, the prospect of continuing the museum to display the archive to the public is now no longer feasible. It is with great sadness and extreme disappointment that we have decided to no longer continue with the RAF Wethersfield Heritage Group or museum.

Over the next three months, we will pack and sort the museum items in preparation to return any items that have been on loan. Donated items will, where suitable, be offered to other local museums or history groups. It is expected the disposal of the archives may take six months to complete which during this time, we may continue with a pop up museum. RAF Wethersfield Heritage Group funds including any raised from the sale of items over this period, will be used for our final project which will be to find and place at a suitable location a memorial and if possible a heritage information board. This will be known as Project Varsity.

56 men made the ultimate sacrifice to protect our freedom while operating from RAF Wethersfield in WW2 and the Cold War and a promise was made that they would never be forgotten. There is no memorial to the fallen or any of those who served at the airfield. It is a sad fact, that the WW2 unit plaque and reference to the memorial garden at the base chapel along with any other signs of heritage have now been removed. We will update when necessary on the progress of the closure and Project Varsity on our public and private Facebook Groups. A target date for the project will be March 24th 2025, the 80th anniversary of Operation Varsity, the last WW2 mission to fly from the airfield.

**From Ron Obernier:**



## **From World War II to the Cold War: An Essex Story of Service, Determination, and the Anglo-American Spirit**

RAF Wethersfield is a significant place, an important airfield during World War II where its service to Britain and the United States stretched on into the future for the duration of the Cold War.

With hundreds of old airfields and ruins scattered across East Anglia and west into the Midlands, RAF Wethersfield remains unique with runways and buildings standing testament to generations of Americans and their commitment to the British and the American people.

Today no light wartime bombers are heard along the runways or jet fighters streaking across the skies, but the lingering memory of pilots, ground crew, and countless thousands of others remain in the hearts and minds of the British people today.

Since the early 1950s, thousands of American families came to live at RAF Wethersfield and the surrounding communities. It proved to be a special time, a special place, never to be forgotten.

This movie was only just completed and is on sale for \$25 each. As I understand it a portion of the proceeds go to the Wethersfield Heritage Group. Go to <http://www.oldsegundo.com/product/wethersfield-at-war> for more information on how to get your copy.

***Desert Diamond Hotel and Casino  
October 30, 2025 – November 02, 2025***



We are still on track for the Tucson reunion in the fall of 2025 at Desert Diamond Casino from Oct 30, Nov 2, 2025. Details will be provided as the events are confirmed.

## **Reunion 2027**

**It is not too soon to start to have a discussion on what the Association wants to do regarding reunions. As of this writing, we have no volunteers to host the 2027 reunion. True, we are four years out, but I do not want to wind up in late 2026 being in the same situation. Reunions take a lot of work, but it is rewarding as well.**

**So, think about what you, the membership, would like to do if we do not have a 2027 Chairperson identified by the 2025 reunion. The Board will propose options for membership voting at our 2025 Membership meeting.**

In closing out this newsletter the Association would like to thank our Webmaster Deborah Lundgren For keeping us in touch and on Social Media.

