

# Red Eagles

## Christmas Newsletter



December 25, 2012

Issue 15

### Fellow Red Eagles: Mike Press

*This quarter's article was written by Mike "Bat" Press. He was assigned to 4477th from June 1979 to June 1981 as Operations Officer. Retired as Colonel, USAF in May 1989. Flew the MiG-17, 21 and 23. Currently Co-Founder and Executive Vice President of Eclipse Aerospace -A Business Jet Manufacturing Company.*



### Flying the MiGs; The Early Years

Ben, thank you for inviting me to write an article about how the Red Eagles were formed and the early days of the Red Eagles. I have been remised and sitting on the sidelines while others carried the flag of the Red Eagles for all these years. Thanks to you and others for keeping the flag waving. For me—NO EXCUSE—so I will try to make up for it with this article—Hope it is informative and entertaining.

After all these years and before my mind and/or body goes I should provide some history and foundation to the Red Eagle story. While I was only a bit player, I was there to watch great minds and great leaders come together to create one of the most creative, important and successful military training projects of our generation. So here is the story of how it all started, from the perspective a young captain fighter pilot.

It was forty some odd years ago (1970) and I was a young F-4 RTU (Replacement



Training Unit) instructor pilot, who had just returned from a combat tour in Vietnam. Ironically my combat tour was in OV-10s as a FAC (Forward Air Controller) but I was lucky enough to get back into the F-4 after my combat tour as some of my FAC classmates and former F-4 drivers ended up in B-52s. I told MPC (Military Personnel Center—assignment division) that if they gave me one of those assignments I would get out of the Air Force and join the airlines, as I was eligible to separate after my Vietnam tour. I guess they listened or just threw another round of darts and I was lucky to get back into the F-4 as an RTU instructor at MacDill AFB.

I was also lucky to get the RTU squadron assignment as the air-to-air weapons instructor because everyone else was more interested in teaching air-to-ground. In those days, going to the bombing range was more fun and competitive than air-to-air. Air-to-ground and dive bombing in the F-4 using fixed sights, skip bombing practice napalm, and strafing using a podded 23MM Gatling gun was challenging and fun. We were flying the F-4D (fixed wing) in those days, which was really a pig of an airplane in air-to-air and therefore most air-to-air work was restricted to boring BVR (Beyond Visual Range) intercepts to launch an AIM-7 missile. We really were not allowed to teach much dog-fighting, except maybe one or two missions of canned setups 1 v 1. Even a 2 v 1 was really a 1 v 1 with the wingman tucked real close in "fighting-wing" (1000-1500 feet). Once the wingman fell out of formation a "knock-it-off" was called and another canned setup began. The F-4D had a bad tendency to depart at higher angles of attack and most students and



### Editor's Christmas Column:

These are my guidelines for Christmas:

- Peace on earth starts with your family. Put aside hard feeling and disagreements on this one special day.
- Spend this day with family and friends and let them know how much they mean to you. Say "I love you" to those special people in your life. Make that phone call on Christmas day.
- Treat each gift you receive as if it cost the giver a fortune. It doesn't matter so much about the gift as the thought behind it.
- Think of your past Christmases and try to make this one the best. This is a time for giving, not just gifts but of yourself.
- You can submit your stories or roster updates by emailing them to: [bgalloway5@elpasotel.net](mailto:bgalloway5@elpasotel.net) or [bobbro@bresnan.net](mailto:bobbro@bresnan.net) or mail to:  
Ben Galloway  
3732 Bar 10 Road  
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even instructors were afraid to maneuver the airplane. I think we had a hard 15,000 foot AGL (Above Ground Level) deck for air-to-air and dissimilar air-to-air was absolutely forbidden throughout the Air Force.

Here is where I first met Gail "Evil" Peck, the father of Constant Peg. This encounter in 1971 changed my life forever. Evil was our Weapons Officer in the MacDill Squadron. In 1972 he went to Nellis as an air-to-air instructor (and later flight commander) at the Fighter Weapon School at Nellis AFB. Unbeknownst to me, the F-4 FWS (Fighter Weapons School) Air-to-Air Flight was working on a couple of initiatives to improve the combat effectiveness of our pilots before they deployed to Vietnam. One was called Rivet Haste and involved training against real MiGs using traditional tactics.

During 1970-1971 there was a bombing halt in North Vietnam. The Navy had started Topgun a couple of years earlier and changed their air-to-air tactics to "Loose Duce" and they were highly successful in air-to-air engagements in North Vietnam in the late 1960's before the bombing halt.

The USAF was still using tactics developed in Korea—namely "fighting-wing" and "fluid" four" formations and the Air Force air-to-air success rate in the late 60's was barely better than a 1-to-1 kill ratio.

The Air Force had to change and started using many things learned from Topgun as a part of the new Air Force model. And, Topgun was using dissimilar aircraft as adversaries,

which became an Air Force goal that ultimately led to the AF Aggressor program.

In the classified world Air Force and Navy test pilots also flew the MiG-17 and MiG-21 under deep cover in the very secret Have Drill and Have Donut exploitation programs. Topgun weapons school instructor participation was extensive in addition to the Navy test pilot community while only a few of the USAF Fighter Weapons School instructors participated.

So during the bombing halt, one of the many initiatives the F-4 FWS initiated was the traveling road show. Because of the rapid turnover in the units and the need to get more pilots trained before going to Vietnam, the FWS road shows enabled the Nellis FWS instructors to visit an F-4 base and give academics and fly missions with instructor pilots at the base. Up until then, the only way for the FWS to provide their knowledge to the command was through their Nellis FWS graduates who returned to their squadrons as weapons officers after their Nellis training.

On one such road show to MacDill AFB, Evil and his flight of air-to-air instructors provided a short course from the FWS. I was selected to be FWS Bill Sakahara's wingman on a 2 v 2 against Evil and another RTU instructor who flew as his wingman. I guess I did OK as I did not fall out of formation the whole engagement. Of course I never saw the engagement as I was glued onto Bill's wingtip for dear life—although I was supposed to be checking six and be ready to take the lead at any time (which I never did). I thought that was the end of my



Front Row (L to R): Captains Roy Stuckey, Marty Cavato, Chuck Johnston, D. L. Smith, Major Bud Hall, Major Randy O'Neill (Operations Officer), L/C Ted Laudise (Commander), 1/Lt Jim Wiggs, 1/Lt Art MacDonald, Captains Dave McCuskey and Gene Jackson. Back Row (L to R): 1/Lt Skip Rosso, Captains Mike Press, Carmen Luisi, Joe Oberle, Tim Mikita, Rick Joep, Ed Clements, Nick Hobbie, 1/Lt Keith Messer, Captains Max Avers, Ron Iverson, Rich Hardy. Not Shown: Major Jim Smith, Captains Earl Henderson, Joe Lee Burns, Joe Gorecki, Sidney Wise, Glen Timm.



opportunity to fly with the FWS.

Then about six months later I get a call from Evil to ask me if I wanted a reassignment to Nellis into the first cadre of the then-to-be-formed Aggressor Squadron flying T-38's to replicate MiG-21's. It sure sounded like a lot more fun than instructing in the F-4 RTU, so I jumped at the opportunity.

After arriving at Nellis in late 1972 and helping start the first Aggressor squadron (64<sup>th</sup> Aggressors), I met up with all the great Nellis FWS tacticians and legends of the time: Evil, Moody Suter, Randy O'Neil, Roger Wells, Boots Boothby, D.L. Smith, etc. (Too many to name). These guys were changing the U.S. Air Force fighter tactics and the way the USAF fighter pilots were going to be trained and fight in future wars. Air combat tactics and training would change forever. Using dissimilar adversaries for air-to-air training became routine, Aggressors squadrons were expanded, Red Flag was started (Moody Suter), and flying against actual MiG aircraft was introduced.

My next encounter with one of the great Nellis legends was in 1973 when Randy O'Neil, 64<sup>th</sup> AS Operations Officer called me into his office and shut the door. I thought I was in trouble, but he said, "Mike, you have been selected for a classified project and I want you to show up at base operations tomorrow morning. Pack a bag for a week. Someone will meet you in an F-4 and take you where you need to go. I can't tell you anything more than that but don't tell anyone, your family, your squadron mates or anyone else where you are going or what you are doing—you will be briefed tomorrow."

Next morning at Nellis base ops, I met a Colonel with an Air Force Systems Command Test Pilot patch on his flight suit. On the ramp was an Edwards AFB F-4. I climbed into the back seat (just like RTU, I thought to myself) and we departed Nellis AFB as the sun was coming up over Sunrise Mountain. We stayed in afterburner on the deck at about 500 ft heading north out of Nellis AFB and then at about 50 NM further north, we dropped down to about 10 feet off the deck as I was looking up at the cactus. We turned westbound and headed directly towards the dreaded box—which I was always told to remain as far away from as possible on the threat of court martial or worse. As we topped a ridgeline heading west, there was a huge lakebed, a long runway and some hangars and buildings on the west edge of the lakebed. Colonel Suits (Norm Suits) then dropped to below the cactus again, lit the burners on big ugly, crossed the lakebed at about 10' AGL just below supersonic airspeed and proceeded to cross the base and boom every window, door, and person on the field. He said this was their normal wakeup call in the morning—"start-of-the-day's -flying activity".

This was my indoctrination to flying MiGs. I spent the next 4 years being a part of the initial cadre of Aggressor pilots that were allowed and honored to fly MiG aircraft. I learned later that Randy O'Neil and Evil while they were in the F-4 FWS were the first TAC pilots to fly the MiGs. Up until about

1970, only the Edwards' test pilots flew the MiGs. Randy, Evil and others convinced the Air Force generals that TAC pilots and specifically Aggressor pilots needed to fly the MiGs so they could accurately replicate the Russian tactics and transfer that knowledge to the rest of the Aggressor pilots and the fighter community as a whole.

I started out in the MiG-17 and then eventually upgraded to the MiG-21. D.L. Smith, Joe Lee Burns, and Ed "PigPen" Clements were the other initial Aggressor pilots flying the MiGs.

We started out flying against the Edwards AFB chase planes under the leadership of Randy O'Neil. Then we moved out of the Aggressor Squadron and flew against the F-4 FWS and the 422 F-4s Tactics and Test Squadron in a program called Have Idea. Pappy Frick was the leader of this program and he worked directly for the Tactical Fighter Weapons Center (TFWC) commander, a two-star general. For Have Idea the TFWC/CC reported directly to the TAC commander and then to the AF Chief. Those were probably the few officers in the Air Force that even knew about the existence of Have Idea, besides the MiG pilots and F-4 pilots from Nellis that flew in the program.

From about 1974-1976 Have Idea advanced from 1 v 1 missions to more advanced tactics development against the FWS and 422. We would fly 2 v 2, 2 v 4 and sometimes 4 v 4 with MiG-17 and MiG-21 aircraft in formations at the same time. Eventually the 422 started receiving their first F-15s and we would fly against them. There were other Aggressors added as MiG pilots over time and unfortunately I can't remember them all, but Kobe Mayo, Gene Jackson, Devil Muller and others (sorry if I forgot you were there).

My most memorable mission in Have Idea came one afternoon in the MiG-21 on a 1 v 2 against either the FWS or 422 F-4s. I still remember this one as I keep waking up at night in a cold sweat (some 40 years later) dreaming about this mission.

I was conserving gas (in mil power) as this was the last setup and I wanted to complete the engagement before bingo fuel. We were flying these missions in the box and I can still remember being on the east end of the box at about 20,000' at the merge. I got into a slow rolling scissors with one of the F-4s and started losing altitude and airspeed after each scissor maneuver. As these were tactics tests, there were NO rules of engagement. If you thought you going to hit the ground before the other guy hit it, then you would try to disengage by rolling-out, separating trying to run away. There were NO "knock-it-offs". The only end to the engagement was either a shot to a kill or a successful cut and run. As we were locked in a tight rolling scissors at about 150 knots and approaching the desert floor at a rapid rate, I decided I could not roll out and separate without taking a heater or gun-shot in the butt, so the only choices I had were—roll-out and get shot and keep from crashing in the desert—OR—light the afterburner and keep fighting and beat this Big Ugly F-4 FWS instructor. So, like the young foolish captain that I was, who had no fear, or regard that he was flying a national asset, I slammed the



throttle into full forward at about 50 knots, nose almost straight up in the air, and angle of attack at probably plus 50 degrees, falling to desert floor below at about 200 feet off the top of the cactus, hoping for a burner light. The reason I wake up in a cold sweat is that in my dream the burner does not light and I wake up and say—OH SHIT! My wife wakes up now and just rolls her eyes and goes back to sleep—murmuring “dumb-shit fighter pilot.”

Next evolution in the 4477th came sometime in 1976 when someone (Pappy and Evil?) convinced TFWC, TAC and AF Headquarters that Have Idea (or its successor) should move out from under the Air Force Systems Command and the box ,onto its own base. So started the move to Tonopah and Constant Peg. I know Evil has written a book on this and he would know how all this takes place. My memory is failing, but again, all the credit for leading the creation of Tonopah and the 4477<sup>th</sup> should go guys like Evil, Pappy, D.L. Smith and others who had to convince the 4-stars on the why and need for Constant Peg, Tonopah and the 4477<sup>th</sup>.

Around this time I left Nellis for Command and Staff College and a short (not by design) overseas tour as the F-5 advisor to the Shah of Iran’s Air Force in Tehran, Iran. Fortunately, or unfortunately I arrived in country as the first revolutionary guard bombs were exploding in the streets of Tehran in late 1978. This is the makings of a good book or article on its own, but if you see the movie ARGO you probably get a good idea of what it was like. After being on the run and hiding in safe houses for two months, I was lucky to be on the last flight out in early 1979 before the hostages were taken in late 1979 and the ARGO guys got rescued.

Again MPC did not have an assignment for me (I was a pop up) so they were going to assign me to a staff job at Wright Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio. I resisted long enough to get a call from Earl “Obi” Henderson, an initial cadre of the Aggressors. He was the new Commander at Tonopah in the now designated 4477<sup>th</sup> TES. Obi wanted to know if I would like to come back to fly the MiGs. “YES SIR!” It beats Dayton Ohio and a desk job any day of the week! Of course MPC resisted and even a general tried to talk me out it saying I would never get promoted past Major because I never had a “real” staff/desk job. I said thank you sir—but I will take my chances at Nellis AFB. Besides, I said to myself, who cares about getting promoted if you can fly MiGs.

I flew for the next two years in the 4477<sup>th</sup> until being named Squadron Commander of the 65<sup>th</sup> Aggressor Squadron in 1981. While in the 4477<sup>th</sup> I started out as a Flight Commander and then moved up to Operations Officer under Tom Gibbs. My memories of that time were good. We were building up the squadron facilities and capabilities, expanding our missions and aircraft. I was one of the first pilots to check out in the MiG-23. This was my second most memorable flight in the MiGs as it was the first (and to my knowledge the only successful) “dead-stick” landing of the MiG-23 or any of the MiGs (at least flown by TAC pilots).

It was my third or fourth transition flight in the MiG-23. Marshall McCloud (RIP) was my chase pilot in a T-38. We briefed

some advanced handling maneuvers and some 1 v 1 BFM canned setups (although this was not part of the syllabus at the time). On one of the BFM (Basic Flight Maneuvers) I pulled too hard on the stick with the wings full back at 45 degrees and the MiG-23 went into a violent departure and eventual spin at about 20,000 feet. The engine caught on fire and came apart, with all the compressor and turbine blades being spit out the back end of the fireball. Marshall kept telling me to jump out, but as calmly as I could, I recovered from the spin at about 10,000, threw the wings forward (still enough hydraulics) and started heading towards Tonopah. Tonopah was about 15-20 miles on the nose and at the rate I was descending it looked like it would be close, but maybe doable. Marshall kept telling me to jump out, but hey—who knew if the ejection seat would work. I decided to take my chances—land on the runway or in the desert. Either way it would be better than trusting some old Russian DRPCB (Dirty Rotten Pinko Commy Bastard) ejection seat. Well, I made it to the north runway, straight-in, blew the gear down at about 500 feet and landed sweetly at about 100 feet past the threshold And rolled out to a stop. Crew chief (forgot his name but bless him and a great guy) was there as I climbed down the steps. I kind of yawned and said, “Chief, it’s your airplane now—sorry about the engine.”

I think Obi or Gibbs put me in for a DFC, but General Crech or the TAC commander at the time said he was deciding on either a court-martial or just a grounding instead. I don’t think he believed Marshall and my story that I was only doing Advanced Handling maneuvers on my third ride in the airplane. He probably thought we were doing BFM—but I don’t know why he thought that as neither Marshall nor I told anyone this story until now. Anyway, I got away with neither—court martial, grounding or an award.

I left the MiGs and the 4477th behind for good in the early 80’s. But for ten years, this was the greatest flying experience anyone could have dreamed of—and I was lucky enough to have lived it. Now I would like to take this opportunity to thank those leaders, legends and early TAC MiG pilots that made flying the MiG’s and the 4477<sup>th</sup> possible—guys like Evil, Obi, Joe Lee, especially the maintainers and other support members of the team along with those not with us anymore: Pappy, Randy, Boots, Marshall, Devil, Pig-Pen, D.L., Gene and whoever I forgot.

#### *Mike “Bat” Press*



*Mike taking off in his Eclipse 500 Very Light Jet. He said he is proud to still be flying jets at his age!*



## 2012 – A Busy First Year!

In October 2011, a large number of us gathered in Las Vegas and had a great time as we participated in the Red Eagle Reunion. An outcome of that reunion was your vote to establish a Red Eagle Alumni Association. That was quickly followed by your ratifying a by-law document that mandated the formation of a Board of Directors to lead and administer the Association. I was fortunate enough (smiley face, here!) to be one of those folks – so, on behalf of your BoD, I thought I'd provide you a short recap of a few of the issues that we addressed this past year. But before I get started, please note that a **4477<sup>th</sup> Red Eagle is a Red Eagle and always will be – BUT, unless the 4477<sup>th</sup> Red Eagle pays dues, he/she is not an active Member of the 4477<sup>th</sup> Red Eagle Alumni Association!** And, a frequently asked question is “What do I get for my dues?” Hopefully, this article provides the answers!

**Incorporation.** Our first task was to organize ourselves, then seek recognition as a recognized organization. This was accomplished – Nevada now recognizes “4477<sup>th</sup> Red Eagle Alumni Association (REAA)” as a duly registered and approved corporation. Further, our request for ‘non-profit’ status was also granted. As a sub-task to incorporation, we are also required to file a tax return each spring and renew our status each November. The preceding took you a minute to read – please know that the back and forth, paperwork, ‘do this-do that and do it right’ details took over three months. Then, **WE** could finally establish an official REAA bank account. We all owe John ‘Admiral’ Nelson our utmost thanks – he made it happen! Your dues funded the costs of incorporating.

**Membership and Dues.** The details of applying for REAA Membership, including setting a dues amount, were addressed next. After many email discussions, we established the procedure, fee structure and Membership categories that have been discussed in other articles (thanks to Jim ‘Bluto’ Keys and his committee for making this happen). And as an on-going endeavor, the Membership Committee is working to fine-tune the ‘Red Eagle Lists’. As a group, we established Membership criteria as assignment to the 4477<sup>th</sup> during the timeframe of 4477<sup>th</sup> existence (1978-88); however, our original list included the names of folks from other times/organizations that did not meet our criteria. That list has been filtered; but, we all know of folks from other MiG affiliated organizations (prior to, during and after our timeframe) that would be welcomed as part of our organization should they so desire – so, we have established a way for that to happen. In fact, we approved three non-military types as Associate Members – Bryan Hardy, who provided us pro-bono legal services and will continue to do so; Steve Davies, the author of *Red Eagles*; and Neil Henderson, our audio-

visual expert and son of ‘Obi’.

**Historian.** In order to capture and preserve our past and present, we established the position of Official Historian. Thanks to Gail ‘Evil’ Peck for taking on this endeavor. He has already dug in – don’t be surprised if some of you get some calls from him for help.

**Website.** Throughout the year we discussed the possibility of a website. Due to the persistence of Bob ‘Bro’ Breault (he wouldn’t let the issue die), and the expertise of Melody and Ben Galloway, we have one [www.4477reaa.com](http://www.4477reaa.com). Visit it – although it will always be a work in progress, I think you will be impressed by the work it embodies and the information it provides (thanks, Melody). The website is funded by your dues. Additionally, Bro established a Red Eagles Facebook page, [www.facebook.com/groups/75655098950](http://www.facebook.com/groups/75655098950); and Ben and Bro continue to provide us all with emails on pop-up issues as well as this newsletter on a quarterly basis.

**Reunions.** *One of the primary tenets of the establishment of the REAA was to have an organization in-place to organize reunions.* A portion of our REAA dues will be used to fund the upfront expenses (provided by the organizers in 2011) of these reunions and to offset some of the ‘socializing’ costs (again, provided by organizers in 2011, partially reimbursed by passing the hat at the dinner). After much deliberation, we established a three-year frequency for large, formal reunions. The next reunion will be in 2014 – planning will commence early in 2013 – more information to come. In the interim, smaller, pop-up type events (get-togethers, aircraft dedications, etc) are always welcome. Rob ‘ZMan’ Zettle is the POC for non-Las Vegas located events – for Las Vegas area events, contact Phil Young.

**Reunion DVD.** Through the efforts of Earl ‘Obi’ and Neil Henderson, we were able to use dues money to provide all active (dues paying) Members a DVD that captures some of the highlights from the 2011 Reunion. They were sent out in July following the release of Evil’s book (they contain some of the book’s photos and we needed to wait for its release). DVD copies can be purchased by sending \$3.50 and mailing address to ‘Admiral’ Nelson.

**Other.** Numerous smaller issues arose that we discussed. One had to do with sponsoring a booth at the annual Nellis Air Show, *Aviation Nation*. Unfortunately, timing did not support our ability to participate appropriately. It is on our plate for 2013. Another had to do with establishing a ‘store’ for Members to obtain memorabilia. We decided the size of our target audience did not warrant the expense and hassle associated with establishing a formal, Pay Pal supported store on our website. Instead we chose to simply advertise on the website and fund (with your dues) a small amount of



items. If some type of whatever is requested, we will help facilitate obtaining it. We also discussed the viability of registering our patch. That issue remains open.

**Budget.** Regulations allow us to carry up to \$50,000 in our account before we have to become concerned with tax/non-profit issues. Our carryover into 2013 is approximately \$5,000. So, when combining the demographic of our group (we are old!) with the reality of a closed group (no new Red Eagles being generated!), it is safe to say we will not have a problem remaining within our limit. But, if there comes a day that we receive an unforeseen influx of money (donation, article sales, additional dues-payers, etc), we will find a worthy cause to support!

**Annual Board Meeting.** We met our requirement for an annual meeting by convening an 'email' meeting during the month of October.

While this article does not provide the entire story, I hope it gives you a sense of what your dues and volunteer Board have done for your organization this year. Bonnie and I wish you all a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

*That's all I have - Scotty*

### Alumni Dues are Due in January

Red Eagle Alumni Association (REAA) dues are due the first part of January each year for those of you paying annually. The cost is \$25 per year.

Lifetime membership dues may be broken up in five payments of \$50 over five years and are also due the first part of January as well. Or if you prefer, you can make a one time payment of \$250.

To order the Reunion DVD (In the previous article by Scotty) and to pay membership dues, checks should be made out to **REAA** or **Red Eagles Alumni Association** and sent to:

**John Nelson**

**4016 Spring Crest Lane**

**Las Vegas, NV 89129**

Best wishes for a Merry Christmas and a very Happy New Year!

*Ben Galloway*



### Red Eagles Web Sites of Interest

The Red Eagles Alumni Association has a new web site. Take a look at:

[www.4477reaa.com](http://www.4477reaa.com)

Here are some web sites that you may find of interest. Just click on the link to take you to that site.

Red Eagles Facebook page. This site is maintained by Bob Breault and myself. We currently have over 65 members. Please feel free to request to join the group:

<http://www.facebook.com/groups/75655098950>

Military.com, this is listed as the 4477th Test Squadron. We currently have over 47 members listed:

<http://unitpages.military.com/unitpages/unit.do?id=600794>

### In Memoriam

**Steve (Uncle Steve) Hovermale**, MSgt, USAF Ret., 12 December, 2012. We lost Uncle Steve after a prolonged illness. He did not want a service and was cremated. Our thoughts are with his wife, Mary, and his family.

On a personal note, Uncle Steve taught me how to properly shift a 13 speed "Road Ranger" transmission and drive the Kenworth in early 1980. He gave me my final check ride and was there to give me support when I got a speeding ticket in Arizona on that same day. Bobbie Ellis was not happy with either of us when we got back from the road trip. We will miss you Uncle Steve.

*Ben Galloway*

