

"A GATHERING OF EAGLES"

By Michael J Larkin, Captain TWA

Aviation Cadet Class 61–Foxtrot

"HALT, RABBIT!"

"WELL, MISTER, ARE YOU A RABBIT?"

"No, **sir.**"

"SPEAK UP, MISTER, I CANT HEAR YOU!"

"SIR, NO SIR!"

"MISTER, **YOU** ARE SPASTIC! POST ME ONE, MISTER!"

Are we overhearing a pre-flight aviation cadet being hazed by an upperclassman? No, just a group of ex-aviation cadets, now aged or retired airline pilots and senior military officers, having fun and remembering their days at Lackland, Kelly, Randolph and Brooks AFB, Texas, where they were rudely introduced to the Aviation Cadet flying programs many years ago.

Thanks to the efforts of retired Delta Captain Errol Severe and his very talented wife Beth, approximately one thousand former aviation cadets from the United States Air Force with their wives or guests traveled to San Antonio, Texas on October 15th, 1997, to renew old acquaintances, make new friends, and reminisce about days spent as students from 1917 until 1961.

This was the first time in history that all classes and positions, pilot, navigator, bombardier, and observer were brought together in one place. The Fraternity of the Air! It was truly a moving "window" in time for all who were there. The agony and the ecstasy of learning to fly.

If you are under the age of forty, you are probably asking, "What is (or was) an Aviation Cadet?" Good question. I think I know the answer.

From the first class of flying students in 1917 until the last cadet graduated in 1961, about 350,000 young men were trained by the USAF to be pilots, navigators, bombardiers, and observers. They helped the French and British defeat the Kaiser in World War I. They were the Flying Tigers in China. They defeated Hitler, Tojo, and Mussolini in World War II, scored a 16 - 1 kill ratio in Korea against the superior Mig-5, fought the "Cold War" with Mother Russia, fought and died in Viet Nam and the Gulf War. And when not hobbled by politicians, they always won!

Who was this boy/man? He was an Irish farm kid from Illinois, a Brooklyn second—generation Italian, a German immigrant, a Mississippi sharecropper's son, a California movie star. He was a lumberjack from Minnesota, a rancher from Montana, an oil field roughneck from Texas, a cowboy from Kansas. He had a dream, something in his gut from age 13.

"I want to be a lighter pilot. I want to fight for my country! Here' s the deal: I can't afford to go to college. You teach me how to fly, you pay for the gas, and I'll risk my butt."

And woe betide the enemies of America!

And risk they did. A bomber pilot once told me this story. He was an Aircraft Commander flying raids over Schweinfurt, Ploesti, Berlin, Dresden, Cologne and Hamburg. In those days his life expectancy was thirty days.

In one raid, as a leader of the second echelon, the entire first echelon was shot down! He was now the mission commander. Twenty-three years old, growing up very rapidly in the left seat of a B-17!

My Primary instructor, Sven Olsen, formerly a B-26 pilot in Europe during World War Two was unflappable as I tried my best to kill him in a jet trainer called "Tweety Bird". Like the hawk, he could not experience the emotion of fear in flight.

My Squadron Commander in Basic Pilot Training flying T-33s was Major Harry Winberg. He had ejected from an F-86 at low altitude in Korea. He hit the ground still strapped to his seat! Fortunately, it was on a snow-covered mountainside where he slid to a halt. As he was boarding the rescue helicopter, it was disabled by ground fire. Boarding the second rescue craft, he was shot through the hand. A flight surgeon finally shot him down with an overdose of penicillin, which burned the hairs in his inner ear. After that, he could only fly day visual missions.

And so they came: Charles Lindberg, Jimmy Stewart, Bob Hoover, Richard Bong, "Gabby" Gabreski, Dick Jabara, Doug Campbell, (America's first "ace"), Ted Williams, George Gobel. A litany of believers in air power, air superiority, air dominance, at a time when the Army was still buying and training mules! Oh, and me, the author, and my last check ride, where I once again failed to meet my already sub—standard performance parameters. Mums the word! I have a son who wants to be a fighter pilot.

And so the aviators came back to San Antonio on October 15th for an incredible weekend of camaraderie, conviviality, and congeniality. They revived long lost friendships, compared notes, reviewed class books, watched movies, inspected photo albums, fondled memorabilia, re-told war stories from long ago. Col. Harold Newman stated, "The older I get, the braver I was!" 'Nufsaid.

Allow me to digress.

After jump seating on Southwest from MCI to SAT, I board my hotel bus bound for reunion headquarters, the Radisson Market Square. Most of the passengers are arriving for the reunion. I meet Lt. Col Ed Balch. He is a graduate of class 41 - E. Soon war is declared. He is assigned to fly the Bell P-39. "It was a good airplane," he states. Then came the P-40, P-47, P-51, P-63. He describes each airplane as if describing a woman, her faults, her charms, her failings; but he loves each of them equally. Beautiful, fast, challenging, dangerous, exciting! I find his daughter Susie who accompanies him lovely, blonde, personable, captivating. Hey, I'm a cadet! Some things never change!

On Thursday, we gather for registration, hors d'oeuvres and soft drinks, meet old friends and make new ones. Later, we board buses for Kelly AFB, where group pictures are taken and Happy Hour is celebrated. We fill a hangar with 1,600 ex-cadets, wives and/or companions. Now into the chow line, where an abundant dinner is served by Kelly AFB personnel. We stand as the colors are presented, and Beth Severe sings our National Anthem. Her rendition is so unique and emotional that not an eye is dry when she finishes! Then grace is said by Col. (Rev.) Leroy McMath, class 54 -M. After dinner, we are honored to hear about today's Air Force from four-star General Lloyd W. "Fig" Newton, Commander of Randolph and the Air Education and Training Command. He states all is well in spite of budget cutting. We are smaller, but smarter.

On Friday morning, we board buses for tours of choice, Lackland, Kelly, Randolph, or Brooks. Back to the Future! At Randolph, some pilots find their old quarters changed little in forty-plus years. (The wives' eyes are beginning to glaze over about now). We tour and see today's trainers. Hands reach out to touch old airplane friends like the T-37. Eyes grow moist. Our tour guide is a Captain named Jeff. He is a Navigator instructor. We make his life hell for an hour. Being a good Nav, he tells us where to go! All in good fun.

At 1930 hours we return to the Municipal Auditorium for Happy Hour, a barbecue dinner, and then dance the night away to the music of cadet Pete Peterson, class 55-Victor, and his Collection Jazz Orchestra; "In the Mood", "String of Pearls", "I've Got You Under My Skin", then Beth sings, "Why not Take All of Me", and a thousand cadets agree wholeheartedly! Unfortunately, Errol is watching.

Sadly, Saturday morning arrives and most of us say our good-byes, promise to keep in touch, and plan the next big "Gathering of Eagles" in 2000. We promise to visit each other soon. Hugs, tears, and goodbye. I still love you, dear friend! I haven't forgotten the day you risked your butt to save mine!

The author wishes to thank Captain Errol Severe, Delta Air Lines (Ret.), and his multi - talented wife Beth for their incredible efforts in bringing about this "Gathering of Eagles. " In addition to spending two and one half years writing a history of the Aviation Cadet program entitled "The Last of a Breed, " Erroll and Beth plan to establish an Aviation Cadet Living Museum as a permanent memorial to all Aviation Cadets. The site is near Branson, Missouri, which hosts over two million visitors a year to this beautiful Missouri lake and music entertainment resort. Much more than a showcase museum, it will give all who come the "Cadet Experience." Similar to Colonial Williamsburg, actors will play the part of cadets to make the program come alive.