

Red Eagles

September Newsletter



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Issue 3

Fellow Red Eagles: Commander's Call

This quarters article was written by Earl (Obiwan) Henderson, the third commander, 4477th TEF/TES.

My short eight months as the commander of the 4477th are filled with so many memories of people and events that it is hard to pin down any favorites, but I will try. Indulge me as I recall some mainstream, and some less than mainstream people and events.

Reflections on Bobby Ellis

I had never met Robert O. Ellis until after I assumed command of the 4477th in Sep 1979. The day before I took command I was on an airline flight to Langley AFB to attend the accident briefing of the first 4477th accident that killed Hugh Brown. Plus I was told that I would meet General Creech and get his "approval" to take over the 4477th. On board the airliner were Major General Robert Kelley, the TFWC/CC, and my old friend Jose Oberle, who was the Operations Officer of the 4477th at the time. Until Jose saw me at McCarran airport that morning he had no idea that Gail was about to be replaced. Jose and I spent the entire flight to and from Langley talking about the tasks ahead of me in assuming command after Gail Peck. The very first subject Jose covered was Bobby Ellis and how important he was to the maintenance of the aircraft and the success of the 4477th.

When I returned to Nellis and walked into the squadron I called a meeting of everyone and explained how the events of the past 48 hours had unfolded and what guidance I had received from General Creech and General Kelley. I then asked for a private meeting with Bobby Ellis where I requested that he work with me to get past the turbulence of a sudden change of command. He was wary of me and appeared to be apprehensive of what impact I might have upon "his world," but

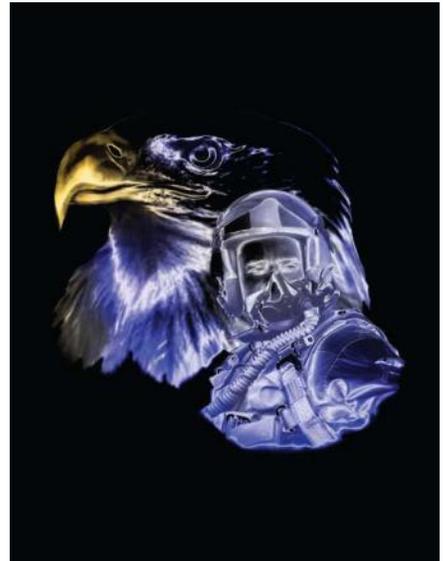
he promised to cooperate. Over the next eight months he delivered on that promise and we developed a harmonious working relationship and the job got done.

Bobby Ellis was a very complex man. He had a brilliant mind with incredible retention of voluminous information. He was a walking encyclopedia of Soviet aircraft. He was the equivalent of having ten Mikoyan technical representatives on site to provide support. He could tell you that a hydraulic accumulator fitting on a Su-7 would fit a MiG-17 engine fuel supply line, but not a MiG-21 engine. He knew all MiG-17 and MiG-21 engine variants and the differences in sight and sound. He knew every single MiG spare part we had on hand at Tonopah on first name basis. He knew everyone in the US who could reverse engineer everything from fuel bladders to disk brakes. All this, without referring to a single written word, was all in his head.

Bobby was revered and idolized by every single maintenance man. He was called Daddy and they all had been personally taught their MiG maintenance craft by Daddy. If they faced a problem on any given day and they did not have a solution, they would always turn to him and he always seemed to have an answer—and it was invariably a correct one.

Bobby had boundless energy and always seemed to be working 10 issues simultaneously. He was everywhere throughout the flying day—on the line watching and correcting crew chiefs if necessary, in the supply hangar helping design a parts stocking inventory system, in the fuel pit trying to figure out why our brand new POL tank was leaking, or looking at blueprints for new MiG-23 hangars to ensure the correct three phase power was in the right location. It was mind-boggling the depth of knowledge he had

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Editor's Column:

As you all know by now, Project Constant Peg has been declassified as of 2007.

- This newsletter will be sent out once a quarter and will be an open forum for all to use.
- Please feel free to share your stories, comments and photos for other members to enjoy. If you wish to submit a picture, please send it in a jpeg format.
- If you know of other Red Eagles that are not aware that our project has been declassified, please inform them and send them copies of the roster and newsletter.
- You can submit your stories or roster updates by emailing them to: bgalloway5@elpasotel.net or bobbro@bresnan.net or snail mail:
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on so many subjects.

At the same time, Bobby was single-minded and nearly impossible to steer in any direction. His independence frustrated me more often and in more ways than any other squadron member. Even when he would appear to be compliant with a plan or proposal, I was often left with doubts about whether he truly implemented what I wanted. He was crafty and elusive enough to work the system and leave no visible trace.

Bobby was a world-class pack rat and hoarder. In the early days of the 4477th operation the budget never quite caught up with the exploding growth (addition of MiG-23 aircraft), and we were always scrounging for makeshift solutions to storage, housing, supply, etc. As a result, Bobby sent his guys out on DRMO (Defense Reutilization Management Office, i.e., salvage yard) raids throughout the Southwestern US. They brought back a conglomeration of house trailers, supply racks, temporary shelters, Jacuzzis, pumps and valves and...you name it. Only Bobby knew the "Grand Plan," and I was constantly being surprised by a new structure or vehicle at the Tonopah complex. It looked like a shantytown, and it was called "Indian Village" for very obvious reasons. More than once I was left with trying to explain to my DO or the Wing/TFWC commander why I needed a vehicle that had only an engine, a chassis, a steering wheel and a seat—AND, "Who was that tiny man driving the vehicle who looked like Yosemite Sam, full beard, unkempt hair and all." His name was Billy Lightfoot and he was my (Bobby's) vehicle maintenance specialist.

I could almost never get Bobby to write anything down, and there was a scary amount of information in his cranium—procedures, background data, points of contact, future plans etc. I worried all the time about his "only man" control. If something ever happened to him we would have been left floundering in the dark for a considerable amount of time.

What a profound loss that he is no longer with us to confirm and astound me with his "remembrances" of our time together in the Red Eagles.

Hiring a New Secretary

With his sudden departure, not surprisingly, Gail left me with many incomplete tasks and issues. One task was hiring a new secretary to replace one who had just quit. The maintenance guys (and pilots) referred to the outgoing secretary as "Brunhilda." Needless to say, she was not of their blood and she could not wait to get away from that weird group of individuals with the super secret mission. The squadron guys were equally happy to see her go.

Secretaries are GS employees and at Nellis, squadron secretaries start as a GS-4 or GS-5. The secretary for the TFWC commander was generally a GS-9 (although it is now a GS-8). When there is GS opening, the position is posted and anyone with the qualifications submits their names. As squadron commander you look at the list of applicants and tell the civilian personnel office which ones you would like to interview. Gail was in that process when I took over.

The Nellis Red Eagle operations were conducted out of a white doublewide trailer in the parking lot south of the Fighter Weapons

School. There was no privacy. The commander's office was a 10-foot x 10-foot room with an accordion door that would not even latch. As I interviewed new secretary candidates, everyone in the squadron could, and did, walk by to "check them out!" They would individually give me a secret ballot vote with a thumb up or thumb down. I always had to make sure the new candidate was sitting in a chair where she could not see the men walking by in the hallway. I also had to work very hard to keep a sober game face on during the interview.

One candidate was a very stout woman who had trouble entering my office through the accordion door and could not even fit in the chair that faced my desk. She spent the entire interview with just one cheek in the chair. Needless to say, there was a thumb down by all that walked by.

After about 10 candidate interviews—in walks Eunice Warren—vah vah vroom!. Eunice had just recently married Sgt David Warren, a maintenance technician on the USAF Thunderbirds. They had met when the team visited Wright-Patterson AFB. Eunice was a GS-11 executive secretary for one of the Directorates in Air Force Systems Command. She moved to Nellis after marrying David and was looking for work as a secretary. She quickly found out that a GS-11 position was out of the question, and the best she could do was a GS-4. When she showed up at our trailers she was dressed very smartly and business-like. She was very beautiful and was very shapely. The commotion outside my office during the inter-

view was exceedingly distracting. At least 50 men passed my door and there were only 30 men total in the squadron. There were a lot of second and third looks and a unanimous thumbs up. She was over qualified, but I hired her despite that shortcoming.

Our daily routine was to gather at the trailers early in the morning, generally before dawn, sort out the day's schedule and figure out the transportation to Tonopah. Then we were off to Tonopah and a long day. Only one or two people were left behind—the secretary, an admin troop and perhaps a supply guy. For the first six weeks Eunice came to work dressed just as she had for the interview—a nice business suit. But she soon found out she was "all dressed up with nowhere to go." In her previous job at Wright-Patterson she got a lot of coffee for visiting Generals, flashed a pretty smile and did a little typing. In the trailers she did a lot of typing and answering the phone, no coffee, and no visiting Generals.

There was a marked difference between working for a three-star General and dealing with a bunch of crusty old sergeants and bone-tired fighter pilots at the end of a long day. Soon Eunice was wearing blue jeans and a bulky sweater. The bulky sweater at least diverted the more obvious stares. She had a sweet personality and we almost ruined her with coarse treatment. She somehow kept her sense of humor and figured out a way to dish out as much as she got. The result was that it endeared her to all squadron members.

She was one of the first people to know that I was having pain down my left arm, especially at altitude (Tonopah). Like a mother hen, she was genuinely concerned, and she pointed out that her father had similar symptoms and it turned out to be heart related.

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Cont: Commander's Call

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I was only 38, so she couldn't be right! Turned out, she was.

If she is out there, and receiving these newsletters, "Eunice, please forgive the men of the 4477th for all of their lecherous stares and comments. You were a great trooper!"

Red Eagle Firefighters

One of the more unique group of individuals in the Red Eagles throughout their history was the firefighters. During my tenure it was Ralph Payne, Kermit Deitz and Robby Robinson.

Within all USAF installations, firefighters have always been loners, not by choice, but by vocation. Even before 9/11 they were the ones you never saw, the ones you never knew by name, but you always counted on to be there when the catastrophic event happened. They were the super heroes quietly waiting to be called upon by claxon, by warning horn, or by the sound of an explosion, near or far. Throughout my career they were simply the men in the big red trucks and asbestos suits you saw responding to the emergency landing. Or, they were the men behind the large fire hose spraying you down at the end of 100 missions over North Vietnam, end of tour at a base, or final flight in an Air Force flying career. But almost always they were nameless faces. They did their deed, and then disappeared back into the shadows to wait for the claxon.

Ralph, Kermit and Robby were selected by Ellis, hired by Peck and gratefully appreciated by me. They belonged to neither the pilots nor the maintenance crowd—they had their own organizational niche and truly reveled in it. At every going away party there was always a presentation by the officers, by maintenance, and by the firefighters. Until the Red Eagles came along, firefighters, as a group within the USAF, had never enjoyed a close association with any single organization, anywhere. When these three men arrived at Tonopah they immediately knew they were a part of a unique group of people, and they quickly made their own mission within that group. Under the leadership of Ralph Payne they completely reinvented the concept of emergency response at a remote fighter base. Ralph recognized that the strict rules on



fire safety and safe separation between combustibles had to be "flexible." He was in my office almost daily discussing the issues, and fire response rules, but always trying to accommodate the mission. He was a master at compromise and a cherished advisor.

A typical base the size of Tonopah would have had at least 12 firefighters—we had three. With significant fire response forces more than 50 miles away, these men knew that if "it" ever happened, it was up to them to do the right thing, whether it be put out a hangar fire to save a "national asset" or pull a pilot out of cockpit of a burning fighter aircraft in the overrun. They were zealous, ever-ready rescuers—always on guard. More than once at a squadron party, Kermit, slightly tipsy, came up to me and my wife, Andy, and told us both that if ever there was a time when I was in a cockpit and on fire, he would physically pull me free and rescue me. Never did I doubt that he would, or could, do exactly as he said. He was like a pro football offensive lineman telling his quarterback..."Don't worry, I will always be there to protect you," followed by..."I love you man!" As a group, they loved the persona they had become, and I loved them for it.

One of my most treasured memories of my days as a Red Eagle commander was working with the firefighters. The plaque they presented to me upon my departure has a special place of honor in my home on my "I Love Me" wall in my home office.

Earl Henderson

Editor's Note:

Our Firemen at the site were a very close and important part of our family. Over the years we have lost track of one another. Kermit Deitz is the only Fireman I've been in touch with but he 's not sure of the location of the others. If any of you know where our firemen have settled down, please tell them to phone home.

Evergreen Aviation & Space Museum, McMinnville, OR

August the 15th, 2009, the Evergreen Air & Space Museum dedicated a MiG-21 to the 4477th TES, the Red Eagles. I was lucky enough to be able to attend. My wife, Melody, encouraged me to go, so I took her advice and used my kitchen pass. I made reservations the month before and almost everything went smoothly with the trip. Leaving Colorado Springs on the 14th of August, I arrived the day before the dedication ceremony and drove to McMinnville from Portland. It was my mistake to arrive on a Friday afternoon and drive in rush hour traffic with everyone heading home for the weekend. It took me two and a half hours to drive 45 miles with a GPS. I usually stay pretty calm but even this was too much. I'm fairly sure the veins were sticking out of my neck by the time I arrived.

For those of you who may not know, Evergreen Air & Space Museum is now the home of the Spruce Goose. This is a huge facility on several acres and with some very large buildings including an IMAX theater. On approach to the museum, one can't ignore the huge white and green 747 sitting out front and the large buildings several hundred yards behind it.

The morning of the 15th, I called Gail Peck on his cell and made arrangements to meet him in the museum parking lot around 11AM. I made contact with him and his friend Bob around that time. This was the first time Gail and I had actually met. We had exchanged many emails back and forth but had not set eyes

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Evergreen Aviation & Space Museum, McMinnville, OR, Cont'

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on one another until then. There was an instant bonding that occurred when we were finally able to meet face to face. Some hand shakes and a few slaps on the back and we were off to the main building.

We found Mick Simmons there, checked in and had our hands stamped for access to the main building for the dedication ceremony. While waiting for the others to arrive, we went into the main building to get our first look at the MiG-21. Walking out into this massive hanger, there is no way you can ignore the gigantic Spruce Goose. It dwarfs everything around it. Simply said "IT'S FREAKING HUGE". We proceeded to the ceremony area off to the left side of the MiG. She was beautiful. You could tell right away that someone had put a lot of love and care into restoring her. She was sporting a fresh paint job with polished metal highlights. It had been some 25 years since the last time I stood this close to a MiG-21. Those old feeling came flooding back as if I had found a long, lost love. I can't begin to imagine how the pilots that flew these aircraft that were there must have been feeling. The MiG bears the name of pilot Smokey Sundell on the left side of the canopy and crew chief JD on the right.

A maintenance specialist from the museum walked us around the MiG. He went over the restoration details and challenges they faced to make this MiG a respectable museum piece. As I walked from the right side of the plane, back to the left, I heard this voice that could come from only one person yelling "Hey Ben". Even after some 25 plus years, I couldn't forget Ike Crawley's voice. I spun around and there he was, about 30 feet away and I yelled back. He was a little older and a little uglier than the last time I saw him, but that was Ike (jet engine mechanic extraordinaire) alright. No doubt about it. More hand shakes and slaps on the back. We had more than a little catching up to do. One by one, our guys showed up. Eight in all, some brought their families along. Greeting were exchanged and a kinship formed between us even though some of



us were not assigned together at the same time.

There were some 100 chairs set up and a slide projector, screen and sound system. Gail Peck set up his laptop and prepared his slide show for the presentation. The ceremony got under way at 1PM. All the chairs filled and more people were standing behind them. Mick Simmons took the lead, then Gail Peck, followed by Charlie "Smokey" Sundell and John "JD" Dvorachek. Each in turn spoke of the concept, formation, assets, maintenance, evolution and the men of the 4477th. They spoke of our losses and our achievements and the invaluable training we gave our military pilots that would soon face these aircraft in a real shooting war.

This was a wonderful event and I'm so glad I took the time to be one of the few that was there to represent the Red Eagles. We were there for all of you that couldn't make it. This is something we can all be proud of, to have this MiG-21 dedicated to all of you. This is a symbol and a remembrance of all the hard work and sacrifice of every Red Eagle to help train our pilots to be the very best.

We stayed until the museum closed at 5PM. They treated us to wine tasting and dinner. Later, in small groups, we were given a personal tour of the Spruce Goose. I had no idea Ike had waited all his

life to sit in the pilot's seat of the Spruce Goose. I listened as he explained that he knew one of the men who helped build it. Ike got his wish and I have the proof. The folks at the museum were nice enough to take photos and present each of us with a print. Hats off to the people of the Evergreen Air & Space Museum for making this happen. If you are ever in McMinnville, Oregon, stop by the museum and see our MiG-21. Please see the next page for more photos.

Ben Galloway



Left to right: Charlie "Smokey" Sundell and John "JD" Dvorachek. They had not seen each other since the photo was taken many years ago when they last served together.

Left to right: Brian McCoy, Dudley Larsen, Charlie Sundell, Mick Simmons, Gail Peck, Ike Crawley, John Dvorachek, Ben Galloway.



Ike and Ben at the controls of the Spruce Goose. Don't tell Ike but I let him fly the left seat.

