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AIRSHOW 98

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The annual Air Fete at RAF Mildenhall is eagerly awaited by many thousands of people each year. Robert Rudhall went behind the scenes to find out how this massive event is organised.

"**C**OME EARLY" is the advice given by Air Fete Director Roger Hoefling, and he should know as he's been involved with organising this major air event since the American Bicentenary Airshow on July 4, 1976. Only by getting to the show early can you savour all of the delights that have become trademarks of Mildenhall — the sheer variety of aircraft in the static parks, the exhibition hangar, the squadron souvenirs hangar, the all-American food and drink outlets, the uninterrupted crowdline and the scintillating flying programme.

This massive event — the largest annual airshow hosted by the military anywhere in the world — is put together each year by a team comprising two full-time civilians and around two dozen part-time project officers from the

Last year the Air Fete hosted the only appearance outside of the USA and Canada of the USAF's Thunderbirds Air Demonstration Squadron. This no doubt contributed to the record-breaking 220,000-crowd on the event's first day. (Airshow - Dave Allport)



During a normal day's work at Mildenhall, the 'static park' ramp is usually occupied by types like this C-5A Galaxy and KC-10A Extender going about their ordinary duties. (Airshow - Robert Rudhall)

USAF's 100th Air Refuelling Wing at RAF Mildenhall, all of whom complete a myriad of tasks leading up to and during the show itself! Air Fete '98 takes place over the weekend of May 23/24 and entry prices consist of £17 per car (including all occupants), £5 per motorcycle, £40 for a minibus seating up to 18, and £125 for a coach or double decker bus (each of these charges covering vehicle and all occupants). There's even a free copy of the

souvenir programme (otherwise sold for £2) for those arriving by car or motorcycle (what other airshows do that?). These charges are identical to last year's event and therefore must represent one of the best value-for-money displays of the 1998 'flying season'.

The Air Fete is held in high regard within the aviation community, and especially by those who visit each year because they like their airshows to be just that — 'pure' and

'unadulterated' airshows, not watered down by fairgrounds and other associated amusements. For this same reason, photographers are also very keen on Mildenhall — it's one of the few remaining places where their shots of aircraft in the static park are not 'embellished' by colourful bouncy castles or carousels.

The Air Fete has another huge point in its favour too — apart from the immediate area around the airfield control tower, the entire crowdline is clear from any obstructions. There are no corporate hospitality tents or grandstands and the like, so the airshow goer gets a clear unobstructed view of the 9,227ft operational display runway!

The show actually prides itself in offering just three essential ingredients — static aircraft, a flying programme and hangar displays. And it is this simple, but very effective approach, that gives Air Fete its unique 'feel'.

But don't make the mistake of thinking that

Any air arm that participates in the Air Fete, comes with aircraft as a result of persuasion.

As the operational demands on military aircraft increase it gets harder to get these aircraft to take time out from their daily tasks to come to an airshow. Indeed, these days the aircraft 'work' on their way to a show, be it a logistic or training exercise, and they 'work' on their way back from an airshow. They don't just fly to the show and then go home again.

Acquiring aircraft for each Air Fete is an ongoing task — the dates for Air Fete 99 and Air Fete 2000 are already pinned to the office wall, and plans, themes and ideas for these forthcoming shows have been formulating for several years.

Being the first major military airshow of the UK display season, the Air Fete team have very little time to finalise the details. The military display organisations normally tell airshow organisers in March which aircraft they can send along for

'static and flying' — some overseas countries leave their notifications even later than that! This means that static aircraft parking requirements, flying display timings, etc, are still being co-ordinated just a matter of weeks before the show takes place.

Those wanting up-to-date information on aircraft participation can receive the latest 'gen' from Air Fete's newslines (01638 543341).

As well as organising the aircraft element, there is the rather daunting task of getting the general public in and out of the airfield over the weekend.

Each year, over 450 road signs are positioned to direct traffic to the display. All of the routes have to be given the go-ahead by the local authorities and great care is taken not to inconvenience the populace living in and around Mildenhall. After all, whether they are interested in the show or not they certainly don't want to become prisoners in their own homes



Air Fete 87. The main static park featured such gems as: SR-71 Blackbird, TR-1, F-111F, EF-111A, RF-4C and A-10, none of which are operating in the UK any longer. Eagle-eyed observers will pick out Boscombe Down's Comet airliner in the background (Airshow - Duncan Cubitt)

simplicity comes easily. Organising Air Fete involves much more than just ringing up a few people and asking them to bring aircraft to the show. Firstly, with the exception of aircraft like those flown by the RAF's Battle of Britain Memorial Flight and the Royal Navy's Historic Flight, all of the military-operated examples that participate have got a much more important role other than appearing at airshows. "Even the RAF's Red Arrows have a war role" remarks Roger. All are used as part of the nation's defences, whatever that nation may be. Secondly, they all belong to somebody else!



Air Fete '90 was one of the first displays to feature a 50th anniversary of the Battle of Britain tribute. Here, The Fighter Collection's Hurricane XII and Spitfire IX fly alongside the Old Flying Machine Company's Spitfire IX and the Booker-based Spitfire IA. (Airshow - Duncan Cubitt)

because the traffic is chock-a-block outside their front door.

Around 300,000 people make the pilgrimage to the Air Fete each year, the bulk of them arriving in cars. Large as Mildenhall is (the whole site covers some 1,144 acres) there is only room for a finite number of cars. With this in mind, Roger initiated a Park and Ride scheme back in 1983, allowing visitors to leave their vehicles at nearby Lakenheath or Newmarket Racecourse and catch a shuttle bus to the show. As an extra incentive, those using the facility are treated to reduced admission prices.

Indeed the Park and Ride is just one part of the success story — in recent years visitors to the show can also 'let the train take the strain' as an increasing number of special services are laid on over the Air Fete weekend. Anglia Railways, West Anglia Great Northern and Central Trains, all offer a flexible service to and from Mildenhall's airshow and once again, there are very reasonable charges for the shuttle bus and combined admission to the display. (The author of this feature can certainly vouch for this alternative — the train and shuttle add up to an ideal 'hassle free' way to get to an airshow.)

Another possibility is to go on one of the many organised coach trips to the show. Roger estimates that there will upwards of 350 coaches descending on Mildenhall this year. These come from as far away as Edinburgh, Penzance, Anglesey, — and even further afield, from Germany and Belgium. What's even more surprising is the diversity of the clientele intent on a day out at Mildenhall. A glance through this year's booking forms reveals supermarket social clubs, police organisations, power station employees, church outings, even bus drivers taking a busmen's holiday. In fact, the scope is so broad that an increasing number of bus spotters have begun to gather outside the entrance gates during the airshow weekend to log the registrations of the more far-flung buses! But, back to the main reason that everyone goes to the Air Fete — the aircraft! The show prides itself on having offered a wide variety of different types over the years, and Roger asks those Air Fete regulars to take a long-term view of the show. "In 1985 we had the first RAF Tornado F.2 display. Granted the aircraft had been seen at Farnborough before, but not in the hands of the RAF. The following year we had the first RAF Tornado F.3 display, and the year after that I purposely asked the RAF for a Tornado GR.1 for the simple reason that it would add variety to the event! It was therefore somewhat strange when I read post-show reports which queried why there was no Tornado F.3 in the display, but failed to mention the inclusion of the GR.1. There are other aircraft, however, that it would seem unusual not to have at each Air Fete, a based Boeing KC-135 for example — so we always try to include one of those.

"In 1987 we managed to get together F-16

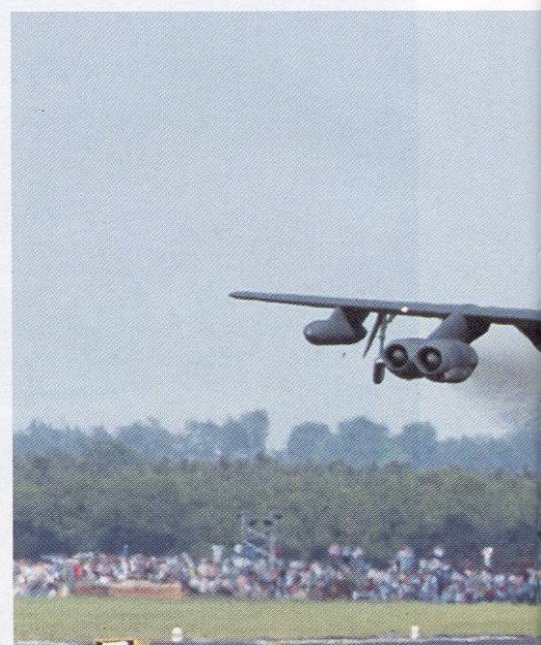


1992 marked the 50th anniversary of the United States Army Air Force arriving in the UK during World War Two. An impressive clutch of warbird types was gathered together at the Air Fete, one of which was The Fighter Collection's Republic P-47 Thunderbolt. (Airshow - Duncan Cubitt)

displays from all of the NATO nations who were then equipped with the aircraft type. We had representatives from America, Denmark, Belgium, the Netherlands and Norway. This scenario has never been repeated at Air Fete. A lot of forward thinking and organisation has to go into realising these aims. It took us three years of planning and negotiations to get the F-117A 'stealth fighter' here in 1992, and the appearance of the de Havilland DH.88 Comet 'Grosvenor House' in 1987 was the end of a 14-year wait to get the record-breaking racing aircraft back to Mildenhall, from where it set off on the 1934 England to Australia Air Race."

The organising and execution of the flying programme is a complex piece of work which is normally finalised around two weeks prior to the show weekend. Display aircraft based at Mildenhall for the weekend have to have their 'slots' dovetailed in with the 'touring items' (i.e. aircraft displaying at the show and then flying on to another event somewhere else in the country). These touring participants have to adhere to a rigid timetable in order to fulfil all of their display commitments on a particular day, so display 'slot times' are strictly enforced on every aircraft. One aircraft over-running its allotted time by just a couple of minutes can cause havoc at Mildenhall and can have a knock-on effect at other shows elsewhere!

Certain aircraft have to perform at certain times of the day for a number of reasons. How many regular Air Fete 'goers' have wondered why, when a B-52 Stratofortress is taking part in the flying programme, does it always fly towards the end of the show? The answer is a question of logistics. In order to park the huge B-52 at Mildenhall (and the Air Fete is one of the few



shows that actually operates the display B-52 from the host airfield itself) the aircraft has to be pushed backwards into one of the large ramp areas on the other side of the airfield. Therefore the Stratofortress will take off and perform its display routine as (normally) the last but one item on the programme. After it completes its display it goes off into one of several aircraft holding areas and waits there until the last item on the flying programme has landed. The B-52 then returns to Mildenhall, lands and taxis 'nose in' onto the taxiway where the historic aircraft are normally parked. After the aircraft shuts down, it is pushed backwards into the parking slot it left earlier. Obviously it would be impossible to do all of this earlier on in the schedule without causing severe disruption! So it is hardly surprising that the operational requirements of the larger aircraft often dictate the running order of the entire display.

Much consideration is given to the public's

desire to get close to the stars of the show. "We park as many as possible of the participating aircraft on the public side of the airfield for just this reason" **Roger said**. "The Red Arrows, for instance, are always lined up on one of the airfield's taxiways which takes on the form of a finger into the crowdline. Behind them on an adjacent piece of taxiway we put the fast jet display aircraft, and these two lines are parked up so that their jet efflux goes over the grass and not over the crowd. However, with the historic aircraft, which we also park on a finger into the crowdline, we find that the audience does not mind the propwash as the aircraft start up, so this is not so much of a problem."

These arrangements work very well at Mildenhall, and visitors can see the aircraft being pre-flighted, engineers going about their duties and the pilots climbing into the cockpits. At many other UK airshows these activities take place on the other side of the runway — far from the gaze of the crowd.

When it comes to planning each Air Fete

defence set piece with Tornados, Hawks and a Victor tanker, plus a NATO E-3A AWACS. Then in 1992 it was time to pay homage to the arrival of the United States Army Air Force in Britain 50 years earlier — that saw B-17G Flying Fortress 'Sally B' flying alongside a P-47 Thunderbolt, P-51D Mustang, A-26 Invader, PT-17 Stearman, PT-22 Recruit and PT-23 in a salute to the USAAF. Then in contrast, the modern-day USAF F-15E Strike Eagle made its European display debut.

Last year, under the banner of 'Fifty and Forward', the Mildenhall display was chosen as Europe's official commemoration to mark the 50th anniversary of the foundation of the USAF. The mouth-watering flying programme included not only the European public display debut of the Northrop B-2A Spirit, but also the return to Air Fete of the USAF's Air Demonstration Squadron, The Thunderbirds, now equipped with the F-16C variant of the Fighting Falcon. This was the first time that the Thunderbirds had left their home base just to perform at a single

overseas event. Sixteen different nations took part — three of them new to the event — and with five national display teams (France, Italy, Jordan, Switzerland and the UK) also going through their paces, the result was a unique tribute to the USAF. Variety is certainly the spice of life at Air Fete!

With all these display aircraft descending on Mildenhall, accommodation has to be found for all the air and groundcrews. The base can offer a total of 405 transit rooms and virtually all of these will be taken up during each Air Fete. Normally these are allocated to the pilots who have to be on site early in the morning for display briefings etc — the 'static crews' are usually 'billeted' in hotels in the Cambridge and Bury St Edmunds area and ferried to the airfield in buses! The task of organising accommodation is further complicated by those air arms who cannot confirm their participation until quite late in the day.

Since 1981 (with the exception of 1984) Mildenhall's Air Fete has been held over the



The mighty B-52 Stratofortress has always been a particular favourite with the crowds at Mildenhall. Here the pilot of B-52G 59-2585 'Swashbuckler' keeps the nose down during the take-off run at the 1990 show. The subsequent display was breathtaking to say the least!

(Airshow - Duncan Cubitt)

significant anniversaries are always commemorated in style. Take just three years as an example — in 1984 RAF Mildenhall's 50th anniversary was celebrated by bringing together a British Airways' Concorde and a USAF SR-71A Blackbird; it was the first time anywhere that the world's fastest military and fastest civilian aircraft had flown at the same airshow. The 1990 Air Fete was one of the first in the UK to mark the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Britain and for the occasion three privately-owned Spitfires and a Hurricane flew together in tribute to 'The Few'. These were followed up later in the afternoon by the modern day RAF, performing an impressive air



Last year's Air Fete took the 50th anniversary of the United States Air Force as its main theme. The flying display featured the awesome B-2A Spirit, making its first public appearance in Europe, and this F-117A Nighthawk, pictured just getting airborne from the display runway. (Airshow - Dave Allport)

Spring Bank Holiday at the end of May, and there is sound reasoning for timing the event over this particular weekend. Mildenhall, as everyone appreciates, is very much a working airfield, and the time taken after the airshow to transform the site back to its usual status, has to be taken into consideration. Hangars have to be cleared, the static aircraft parks have to be emptied of display aircraft and thousands of feet of crowd barriers have to be taken down (and that's just the tip of the iceberg!). Arranging for the airshow to take place on the Saturday and Sunday gives the team the chance to put RAF Mildenhall back to normal during the Bank Holiday Monday.

It is even more fortuitous that the English Bank Holiday Monday is also an American Public Holiday, so the base would be shut down on that day anyway. At the end of each display day the public areas of the airfield are cleared

parking up two of each type just for the sake of it, unless the two aircraft are significantly different, i.e single and two-seater variants! The aircraft are parked in the best possible positions to offer all around views and good photographic angles — while at the same time, ensuring that there is still plenty of room for the crowd to wander freely.

The bid to show off the static exhibits to their best advantage also extends to another common airshow practice — at Mildenhall you will seldom see crews selling their wares in front of the aircraft, as this tends to clutter the view. Instead, the crews can be found inside the Squadron Souvenirs Hangar, where stickers, prints, hats and other such memorabilia can be obtained!

Nor will you see rows of cars parked behind the aircraft — the public car parks are purposely kept separate from the exhibition areas, again

so that they don't detract from the main attractions.

All of these considerations help to give Mildenhall what the Americans might like to call its 'specialness', as indeed does the catering! For many of the regular visitors, the authentic American food is the proverbial 'icing on the cake'. Virtually all of the food concessions are handled by base organisations and between them they noisily set out to tempt the tastebuds with such delicacies as Polish sausage, fried chicken, as well as real hamburgers and hot dogs, washed down with genuine American beer or a soft drink — and, naturally enough, it's all served up with typical American verve and showmanship.

But what of this year's Air Fete? Well, it's a little too early in the planning process (as *Airshow* went to press) to confirm any final details. However, this year's motto is 'Broader Skies' reflecting the increasingly international flavour of the event - 28 countries have taken part, and as Roger pointed out, perhaps giving a cryptic clue "Broader Skies were the last thing over Berlin in 1948" — a reference to the 50th anniversary of the Berlin Airlift. Could this point to the inclusion of a C-5 Galaxy (the ultimate transport aircraft) in the flying programme or a formation of Dakotas over Mildenhall, we will have to wait and see! There is no doubt, however, that Air Fete 98 will once again offer the unique atmosphere that it has achieved over the past 22 unbroken years. I'll be there, I hope you will be too.



Many Air Fete regulars can remember the display given by the SR-71A Blackbird during the 1986 show. Concerned that they had crossed the display line, the crew pulled the aircraft to its 2g limit and at the same time applied afterburners. The SR-71's computer systems did not allow the afterburners to light while g was being pulled, although the fuel was still flowing! As the g came off, the afterburners lit with impressive results. (Airshow - Duncan Cubitt)

of any litter — although, as Roger is keen to point out, "We have a very good record on litter. Visitors to the show put their litter in the many bins provided and on the whole make our job in the evening much easier." Having said that, the evening Fod Plod (Fod = Foreign Object Damage, Plod = clearing up exercise) still has to take place after both days of the show.

At the crack of dawn on the Monday after the display, 1,000 personnel from Mildenhall line-up at one end of the public area and walk the entire length of the airfield, armed with a plastic bag and a pair of eagle eyes. This has proved to be the most effective way of dealing with the problem of stray bits and pieces.

With regards to aircraft on the ground, Roger has often been quoted as saying: "Air Fete is not in the numbers game", and the ideal spacing of the static aircraft parks at Mildenhall each year ably bears this statement out. Most air arms normally send fighter-type aircraft in pairs to airshows, and no point is seen in

Airshow would like to thank Lt Regina Winchester. RAF Mildenhall Public Affairs and Roger Hoefling, Air Fete Director, for their help in the compiling of this feature.



The Air Fete prides itself in the layout of its static aircraft parks — the aircraft are not crammed together, so there should be no excuse for failing to get a good photograph. This EA-6B Prowler 161882 from the US Marine Corps VMAQ-3 was one of the rarities at last year's event. (Airshow - Alan Warnes)

Further information on this year's event is available by telephoning the Air Fete '98 newslines on: 01638 543341, or from overseas on: +44 1638 543341. The event's Website can be found on: <http://www.mildenhall.af.mil/airfete98.htm>