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# AIRCRAFT

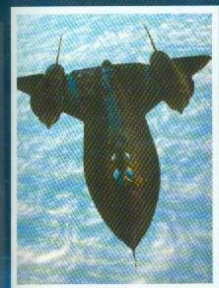
## Richthofen Wing

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- ▼ Air Fete memories
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**PLUS! TIGER HUNTER : 'CANDY BOMBER' INTERVIEW**



### PAUL CRICKMORE

Paul was employed at the London Air Traffic Control Centre, and accumulated a large number of training and orientation flights with both the British and US military. Having received clearance to participate in an SR-71 refuelling training sortie from Beale AFB and, more significantly, an operational mission from Mildenhall, the SR-71 became his specialist subject — he has written over eight books about this iconic aircraft. The latest, 'Lockheed SR-71 Operations in Europe and the Middle East', has just been brought out by Osprey. Paul lives in Suffolk with his wife Ali.

### JOHN DUNNELL

'For many years I was fortunate to be regarded as more or less the staff photographer at Mildenhall's series of Air Fetes', says John, 'with the job of taking and processing pictures for presentation to visiting aircrew, as well as reporting for this magazine. Aside from the privileged access to the base and the chance to photograph some wonderful aircraft, this gave me an opportunity to see Roger Hoefling and the organising team in action. The lead-up to the event was always a hectic time, but the results were some of the most fondly-remembered air displays ever held in the UK.'

### ROBYN FELD

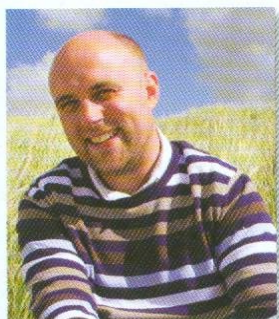
Robyn Feld was the only child of a B-26 pilot and grew up sharing her father's passion for aviation — she still looks up every time an aircraft flies over. Robyn is a freelance writer who has worked with the Red Tail Project since 2006, and in this issue documents its return to immaculate airworthy condition. She is also the author of a book for Alzheimer's caregivers called *The Seasons of Goodbye — An Alzheimer's Caregiver Journal*.

### THOMAS NEWDICK

Now living in Berlin and working as a defence journalist and editor, Thomas takes a particular interest in the history of Cold War air power in Germany, as reflected in his coverage of the Luftwaffe's 'Richthofen' fighter wing in this issue. As well as contributing to *Aircraft*, Thomas also works as Assistant Editor on our sister publication *Combat Aircraft*, and is German correspondent for *Defense News*.

# Welcome from the Editor

What's your earliest aviation memory? Mine is, in fact, also my earliest recollection of childhood — seeing a USAF E-3 flying at RAF Mildenhall's Air Fete '82. I would have been three at the time, and this was the first AWACS display at a European show. I was rather too young to appreciate its significance, of course, but in later years as my aviation interests grew I became well aware of the fact that Air Fete was something special. The word 'unique' is overused, but could certainly be applied to Mildenhall — uniquely free of



commercialism, uniquely imaginative in its content and uniquely Anglo-American in nature. They seem like far-off days now, I thought as I compiled this month's celebration of the 75th anniversary of RAF Mildenhall, and inevitably began running through all my Air Fete reminiscences. The military airshow scene lost something very special when Mildenhall closed its gates to the public for the last time, and it will surely never get it back. But the unique formations, the operational set-pieces, the aircraft debuts, and of course the wet burgers, are great memories to have of glorious days at Air Fete.

It is, by contrast, very sad to report the deaths of two people who contributed much to *Aircraft Illustrated* over many years. On 5 July, renowned aerospace journalist John Fricker passed away. His compilation of this magazine's military news pages was but one minor element of a fascinating career in the business, going back to 1943. Then, on 23 July, Niall Booth was killed in a helicopter crash in Hagerstown, Maryland, along with three other people aboard the Robinson R-44. They were returning to base having conducted a series of flights for the Advanced Helicopter Youth Foundation, of which Niall, who penned numerous articles for *AI* and was also the man behind our 'Captain Plummet' page, was the co-ordinator. He leaves a wife and two children. Our condolences to the family and friends of both John and Niall.

**Ben Dunnell**  
Editor



# Air Fete memories

Think of Mildenhall, and many will think of Air Fete — the biggest air display organised by any single air arm anywhere in the world, and certainly one of the best. John Dunnell reflects upon these great shows, while former Air Fete director and commentator **Roger Hoefling** describes the highlights shown in the archive photography

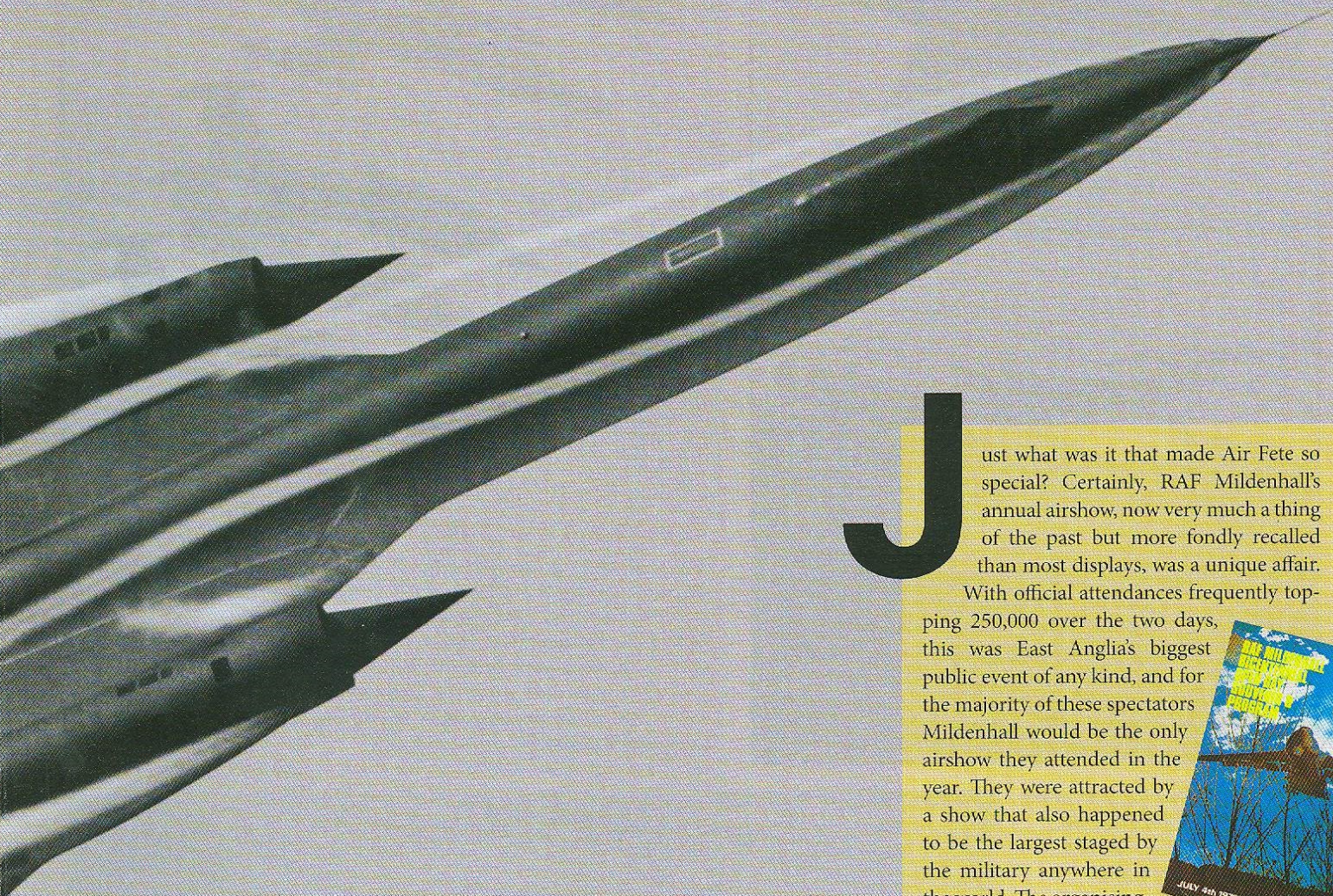
words:  
**JOHN DUNNELL**  
and  
**ROGER HOEFLING**



## Great balls of fire!

'Arriving from the south-west, the SR-71A's limited forward view meant that Mildenhall disappeared somewhere over Newmarket. Keen to adhere to the regulations, the pilot realised he might break the almost west-east display line and so banked to the 2g maximum, adding reheat. Fuel flowed but systems would not allow it to be lit under such conditions. Thus, as the 'g' eased, noisy fireballs and flame added to the vortices to produce a series of classic pictures. Less obvious is that they show the aircraft north of the crowdline, not just display line. Behind the control tower too, on which the Display Director asked if I wanted the SR-71 grounded for its transgression. It was clearly unintentional, so I asked instead for one more run. In the resultant delay, I mentioned to the audience only that I had been asked about an extra run and suggested that they were really the ones to decide: did they want one more? Since it was Saturday, there were only some 100,000 present but they sounded unanimous.'





## Bicentennial show

'The hangar that was the backdrop to so many photographs from the MacRobertson Race onwards became Building 550, Base Operations, to the USAF. Here, it and that American flavour predominate on 4 July 1976 for the Bicentenary Airshow. It was policy that it should be the sole USAF display in the UK that year and, furthermore, it was on a Sunday. The US Navy joined the party, sending this A-6E and A-7E from the USS *America* in the Mediterranean; in the background is a C-131F from the resident US Naval Air Facility. USN colour schemes were not the only thing to change in later years. Availability reduced as well, meaning that although the P-3C that flew in '81 was the first in the UK, an F-14 display was last seen in 1992.'

John Dunnell



**J**ust what was it that made Air Fete so special? Certainly, RAF Mildenhall's annual airshow, now very much a thing of the past but more fondly recalled than most displays, was a unique affair. With official attendances frequently topping 250,000 over the two days, this was East Anglia's biggest public event of any kind, and for the majority of these spectators Mildenhall would be the only airshow they attended in the year. They were attracted by a show that also happened to be the largest staged by the military anywhere in the world. The organising team regarded Air Fete as the place where NATO met the public that funded its operations, an attitude that contributed to its being one of the best-priced major airshows in the UK.

For the visitor, Air Fete had an 'all-American' atmosphere in rural East Anglia that could not be experienced on the same scale anywhere else. The USAF hosts extended family-style hospitality to their visitors — it was more than just an annual chance to sample American beer and burgers, though these were of course very welcome! This seemed to ensure that, in large numbers, people — non-enthusiasts, that is — pencilled Air Fete into their diaries as an annual occasion. This was 'their' airshow, an event without commercial sponsorship (the likes of Coca-Cola, Ford and Mars being gently turned away) meaning a complete







John Dunnell

Peter R. March



## YC-14 and YC-15

'1977's event, HM Queen's Silver Jubilee Airshow, brought together for the first time anywhere the two contenders for the USAF's Advanced Medium STOL Transport contract. Neither won, but they led to today's third Globemaster, proving that 14+15=17.'

'An EC-121T Warning Star of the USAF Reserve's 79th AEW&C Wing en route from Keflavik to retirement at MASDC made the type's final European appearance at Air Fete '78. After the Bicentenary and Jubilee events, it was the first with that title and, yes, it was the alliteration that decided it. In spite of the excrescences in this case, the Constellation family through to the Starliner showed that Lockheed appreciated Hogarth's 'line of beauty', seen in his self-portrait in the Tate.'

## Warning Star farewell



Bob Archer

absence of hospitality suites, and with a limited number of trade stands, these being restricted to aviation or military-related organisations.

Meanwhile, enthusiasts would flock from far and wide to Mildenhall during the days running up to the display itself, filling the local area's hotels and campsites. Of course, they were attracted by the variety of aircraft and showpieces expected at Mildenhall each year once the show's reputation became known. This didn't take long after Roger Hoefling

took over the organisation, beginning with the Bicentenary Airshow on 4 July 1976. The USAF had staged regular Armed Forces Day 'open houses' at Mildenhall for many years, but now the venue's annual event would move into a different league. The Air Fete title was adopted in 1978, and the rest, as they say, is history. More than four decades after Mildenhall had witnessed the start of the MacRobertson race and King George V's Royal Review of the RAF, it seemed especially appropriate that the

airfield should have developed a reputation for hosting major flying displays.

My own role on the fringes of Air Fete was as a photographer. My darkroom would be dismantled and reassembled in Mildenhall's hobby shop, the task being to take and process photos of the visitors either arriving for static display or during their flying routines. The idea was that I should print these in the evenings for presentation to the crews the next day. This meant that I had some contact

## Canadian Starfighters

'Never to be forgotten is the howling of the engines prior to take-off of the CF-104G Starfighters from the 1st Canadian Air Group at Baden-Söllingen. Speed and sound were the speciality, with the emphasis on acceleration rather than aerobatics. Arriving from behind the crowd was always dramatic too. Following a rehearsal after arriving at Mildenhall came the eager 'What did you think of that?' to which the only possible reply was 'Couldn't say, I'm afraid, but Lakenheath thought it was wonderful'.'



John Dunnell





## First sight of the 'Dragon Lady'

'Without publicity, the first planned public appearance in Europe of the U-2 was, as here, at Air Fete '82 — in fact, a U-2R of Det 4 of SAC's 9th SRW complete with relaxed security.'



Peter R. March

## Air Fete '84 overview

'RAF Mildenhall's 50th anniversary was commemorated by Air Fete '84 but it required a change of date for the Thunderbirds to attend, their aircraft being seen on the southern end of the event's fast jet flightline. The team did not endear themselves, and it is greatly to the credit of their successors that in preparing for the 1997 visit it was emphasised to me that they did not wish to repeat the earlier mistakes. Note the Sharks team's Gazelles of 705 Squadron and that most of the flying display aircraft beyond are singletons: only the Tornado GR1, F-15C and NF-5A have reserves.'



## Blackbird's flying debut

John Dunnell



'Detachment 4 of the SAC's 9th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing arrived at Mildenhall in 1979 but it was not until 1984 that approval was gained for the SR-71 to be flown in the display, the first time in Europe. A British Airways Concorde was on the programme too, never previously having operated without airline ground support. It was the first time that the fastest military and fastest civilian aircraft had appeared together on the same flying programme anywhere in the world. I understand it happened only once more, in Canada. As those diamonds in the picture intimate, the earth did indeed tremble that weekend.'

John Dunnell



## Air defenders arrive

'1986's 50th anniversaries of both the Spitfire and RAF Fighter Command were the theme of that year's Air Fete and this 16-ship is just part of the static park arriving. These were an aircraft from each current RAF fighter squadron, joined on the ground by historic equivalents. In the air, a Tornado F2, Phantom FGR2, Lightning F6 and Hawk T1A arrived in formation before displaying individually. Two Lightning F3s then engaged two Hawk T1As in an unprecedented public demonstration. Six Spitfires provided contrast.'

with the show's organising team, with **Roger Hoefling** as co-ordinator, in the run-up to the display and during the event itself. Naturally, I was always keen to try and find out what aircraft were expected, if only to try and discount some of the more extreme rumours. This usually proved impossible until the last minute. Air Fete rarely had formal approval to go ahead until relatively late in the planning timetable, and the organisers were always working to tight deadlines. I am also sure that this was

combined with a 'showman's' reluctance to reveal the content! Nowadays, perhaps only Flying Legends offers the same welcome element of surprise in relation to its participants.

As the 1980s went on, Mildenhall became recognised as an event built around themes. **Roger** had a target list stretching years into the future, and it is to his and the team's great credit that they were able to turn so many into reality with such success. Equally, Air Fete gained fame for the unusual formations it managed to

put together. These were never just 'random' combinations of aircraft that happened to be available — they were all the more memorable because of their significance.

In both cases, the advantage of having a full-time organiser in place, rather than the responsibility for putting the show together falling to USAF personnel who would soon be posted away, was demonstrated. **Roger** could take a long-term view, perhaps never better demonstrated than at Air Fete '87 at which





Peter R. March

## Comet comeback

'At dawn on 20 October 1934, some 60,000 or 70,000 spectators at Mildenhall saw this and 19 other aircraft take off for the MacRobertson Air Race to Melbourne. After 14 years of restoration, the winning machine, this DH88 Comet, *Grosvenor House*, flew in public for the first time since 1938 to return to Mildenhall for Air Fete '87, joining other de Havilland designs ranging from DH2 to Comet 4 and BAe 146. Today, the aircraft's impact in 1934 is difficult to realise, but even in everyday life it did more than promote an hotel and name a pub. That well-known electrical retailer owes its name and original colour scheme to the Comet's success. Now, its red and white has given way to black and yellow, the colours of the Mollisons' Comet in the Race. Coincidence, surely?'

## USAF trio

'Not before seen, even 'back home', this A-10A, F-15C and F-16C formation flown by Capt Sean Jessorun, Maj John Voss and Capt Trulan Eyre provided a highlight of Air Fete '87's USAF 50th anniversary celebration. Simple but appropriate formations became a feature from the early 'eighties with such as the P-51D and TF-100F; F4U-7 and A-7D; Sea Harrier FRS1 and Sea King AEW2; C-131F and UC-12M. The last marked the transition between types in service, as did a formation of an F-15E and three F-111Fs, while four of the latter were often flown pre-contact with an EC- or KC-135 depicting normal local business. Established teams aside, this article illustrates yet more formations, but how many remember 800 Squadron's Sea Harrier FRS1s beginning their sequence by taking-off simultaneously in five different directions?'

John Dunnell



## FB-111

'For many years, neither USAF's 20th TFW nor 48th TFW would agree to fly their F-111s from Mildenhall during an Air Fete, although content to send aircraft for static display. The lack of cables/barriers — the term changes definition in mid-Atlantic — would be cited, even when portable systems were specially installed. SAC's 380th BW relished the challenge to display the heavier FB-111A for the first time in Europe at Air Fete '87, the aircraft living up to its name of *Net Results*.'

John Dunnell



## Fire-bombing 'Herc'

'The Hercules' versatility was displayed often at Air Fete. Here, in 1987, a North Carolina ANG C-130B demonstrated how it fights forest fires. Having located the south side press enclosure on Saturday, Sunday's water run was closer but the only media complaint was 'Given the occasion, why wasn't it Coca-Cola?'



John Dunnell

the Shuttleworth Collection's DH88 Comet made its post-restoration return to the airfield from which it had set off to victory in the MacRobertson race. Roger had been planning this almost from the moment the restoration to flying condition began. Crosswind conditions at Hatfield almost scuppered things, but the Comet eventually arrived just in time to appear as the closing item in Saturday's show, joining an unprecedented gathering of de Havilland designs.

Roger had a detailed input into every aspect of Air Fete's organisation — not just the aircraft participation, but also such things as travel options to and from the event, the Air Fete radio station (pioneered in 1986) and of course the ground displays, as seen to great effect at the UK air defence-themed Air Fetes '86 and '90, at both of which the static park and flying programme contrasted old and new. Few other shows integrated the ground exhibition with static and flying displays, a feature that

certainly contributed to the event's popularity, and the sense of it being unique. The large-scale operational scenarios that often provided the centrepieces of the flying programme — the RAF air-to-air engagements of 1986 and '90, and the enormous Tactical Set-Piece in 1989, being the most memorable — added to this.

Mildenhall being such an active USAF base, serious operational issues could always interfere with the Air Fete's planning or execution, yet somehow Roger Hoeftling and the





## Tactical Set-Piece

'Wanting to mark NATO's 40th anniversary at Air Fete '89 by demonstrating a little of the capability of the UK's Armed Forces, I designed a 45-minute airborne tactical assault involving the RAF and Army. The latter had to withdraw in November '88, but the RAF Regiment keenly took its place. Thus, 150 Regiment troops, 30 armoured vehicles and 50,000 rounds of blank for personal weapons alone were backed by four each of Jaguar GRIA, Harrier GR5 and Tornado GRI plus two Hercules, Puma and Chinook. Matched

by examples on static display in front of the Exhibition Hangar, on the right, behind them against the building was another Harrier in a full hide plus tactical communications, fuel, catering, armament and Rapier units together with a Reconnaissance Intelligence Unit. This processed the film from the two No 41 Squadron aircraft which opened the assault with a two-mile recce run. Prints were displayed three minutes after landing, copies, as here, being offered free to spectators.

'Air Fete '89 took on extra significance after the Ramstein accident of the previous August. It had to survive much questioning by the USAF. Then, insurance underwriters began '89 saying that if displays were allowed to go ahead, insurance premiums would have to increase by 500 per cent. Few events would have survived. The MoD's answer was firstly to have the Red Arrows brief the underwriting community at Scampton on how they adapted their sequences to different venues. At Mildenhall, I then had to explain to the underwriters how an event and its flying display are organised. Premiums increased by only 25 per cent.'

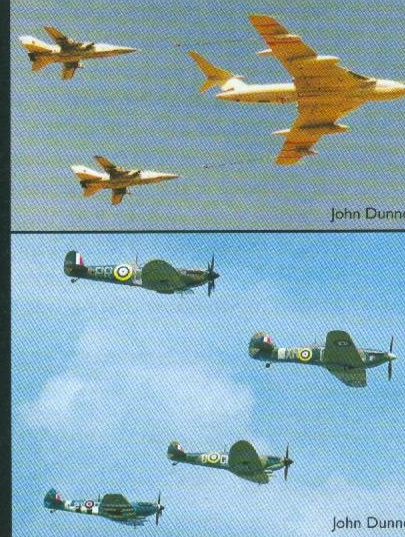


## Saluting the Battle

'Air Fete '90's theme was the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. Each RAF fighter squadron was represented on static display as was the wider air defence context. Together with AAR and AEW types, a Bloodhound missile system with, for the first time, public access to the launch facilities, and a reproduction 1940 fighter operations control room contrasted with its 1990 equivalent were amongst the static and Exhibition Hangar items. Airborne, a NATO E-3A stood off as the Victor and Tornado F3s arrived to set up a CAP. Joined by Hawk T1As

to demonstrate the Mixed Fighter Force concept publicly for the first time, they 'defended' the airfield against more Hawks, alias MiG-23s. Later, Sea Harriers and Sea King AEW2 worked against Hunters as a reminder of the RN's air defence task and contribution to the Battle.

'Then and now' was an aspect of each theme where possible, so Hurricanes and Spitfires were provided, those shown here by The Fighter Collection, the Old Flying Machine Company and Personal Plane Services. A Spitfire owner offered his free of charge, albeit reluctant to reveal the mark. Pressed, he eventually admitted it was a two-seater. Perhaps he already knew my view, but I explained that I therefore could not accept it. He then asked if I'd flown in a Spitfire, which I had not. Would I like a flight in one? He'd offer this and the aircraft free if allowed to participate. Grateful for his generous offer, I nonetheless had to point out that I was organising the event for the audience, not myself, and declined.'



## That B-52 take-off...

John Dunnell

'Air Fete '86 was the first British event to see a B-52 operating from the airfield at which it displayed. Planning plus persuasion of SAC were necessary but I believed it possible. However, confirming the intention to members of Transient Alert, whose admirable efforts completed the annual jigsaw that was the static parks and flightlines, resulted in them immediately leaving the meeting without a word. The plan worked, though, and the first was a B-52G, as was this in 1990. *Swashbuckler* lived up to its name with perhaps the most demanding display of the type seen in Europe at least, described by its commander as 'standard missile evasion tactics'. Here, take-off sets the tone. The B-52 does not rotate but rather lifts, nose down. Gaining speed, all eight engines were then throttled right back and the nose went lower. As the aircraft flew down the runway, all was quiet save for a collective sharp intake of breath from seemingly every member of the audience.'

team seemed to put on the best display possible in spite of the circumstances. Most notably, the 1986 event took place only six weeks after Lakenheath-based F-111s had taken part in the Operation 'El Dorado Canyon' strikes on Libya, a time at which a terrorist revenge attack against US military interests in Europe was considered a serious possibility. Would the event have gone ahead today? Certainly not. In fact, it was surprising to many at the time that Air Fete '86 took place, but there was high-level

backing — a message of support was received from Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher.

In 1991, meanwhile, Operation 'Desert Storm' had not long concluded. That year's Air Fete provided an opportunity for the organisers who made every effort to attract as many aircraft and crews as possible who had served in 'Desert Storm', and they succeeded in giving the public a first chance to see large numbers of these aircraft, many carrying nose art and mission markings. Yet Mildenhall's contingent

of USAF C-130s on TDY (temporary duty) remained heavily engaged in Operation 'Provide Comfort', the Kurdish relief effort, and in fact virtually the entire complement of Hercules was replaced over the show weekend.

The unbroken series of Air Fetes ended with the (premature, many feel) cancellation in 1999 owing to the 'Allied Force' campaign in Kosovo. It then returned for two more years, without Roger Hoefling's involvement after November 1999. The USAF organised Air



## F-117's first time

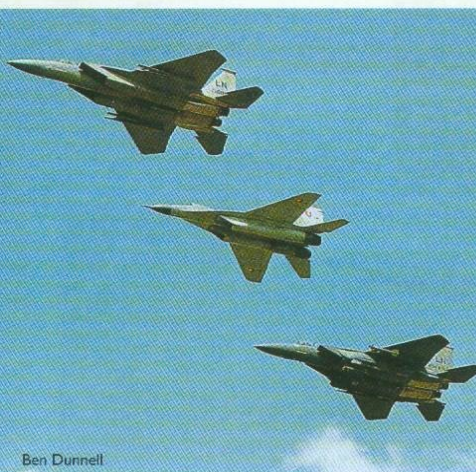
'Obtaining US military participation was never simple. It took three years before 1992 to bring about this picture, the first European public appearance of the F-117A. Its advance party had shown me diagrams of the aircraft on display with a double row of white security fencing around it. The inner ring was around 4ft from the airframe, the second set at perhaps double that. My reaction that this was far too close initially produced bewilderment, as did my plan to fence in the press for the preview rather than the aircraft. Closer to the event, I was rung by RAF Buchan asking if I would take a call from a certain callsign. It was Sqn Ldr Chris Topham, RAF exchange pilot, en route in the F-117A. Confirming his ETA since his mother was due at Mildenhall too, he just wanted me to know that he was at that moment over the North Pole.'



Richard Cooper

## East meets West

'More than just a radical display formation, this combination of USAF F-15C, Slovak Air Force MiG-29 and USAF F-15E had been presaged by my using a Slovak MiG-29 picture for the Air Fete '96 poster and magazine advertisement. Each year, this featured a single photograph, unblemished by copy. This time, a Soviet design promoted a USAF event. In largest form, the poster went up on my office wall. 'Why is that F-15 in that odd colour scheme?' asked a visitor, an F-15C pilot.'



Ben Dunnell

## Spirit of Mildenhall



Ben Dunnell

'Memorable remains the silence that fell over the audience as the B-2A came into view from the east. Making its first public appearance in Europe at Air Fete '97, the aircraft had been seen previously at Paris and Farnborough but only on a trade day in each case. Also different this time was its arrival with an F-15 off each wingtip, albeit here out of shot. I gave no explanation at the time and wonder how many realised why it was escorted.'



USAF

## 'Fifty and Forward'

'The USAF's 352nd Special Operations Group had transferred to Mildenhall from RAF Alconbury by the time of Air Fete '97. As well as being welcome contributors to that year's display as here, a further MH-53 and HC- or MC-130 stood by throughout each event, tasked with long-range casevac within the UK and to the Continent.

'Also shown is that while the static park could have been larger, it would have been at the price of operating many of the flying display aircraft in front of the audience, a key Air Fete feature. Air Fete '97 marked the USAF's 50th anniversary and was the first occasion the Thunderbirds had left the United States for a single display; the team is in the foreground. Amongst others, F-117s are visible, as well as five examples of Boeing C-135 derivatives. In the front row of the larger static aircraft are an EC-135C, KC-135R, OC-135B, RC-135V and E-3B, marking the type's 40th anniversary.'

Fete 2001 by itself, and when the '9/11' attacks and the second Gulf conflict occurred, it was considered that operational commitments and security concerns made staging the show impractical. A return is now unthinkable.

So, all we are left with are great Mildenhall memories — of the formations, the set-pieces, the most spectacular SR-71, B-52 and EC-135 displays you ever saw, first appearances by such as the prototype F-15 Strike Eagle, the F-117, C-17 and B-2, debut displays by the

Canadian Forces CF-188 and French Air Force Mirage 2000, and so much else besides. For me, I think the true spirit of Air Fete was illustrated by what happened at the end of the 1988 show. Making a final appearance in the static park had been a pair of No 11 Squadron Lightnings, an F6 and T5. As the weekend's flying programme neared its close, they were towed to the flightline and Roger Hoefling announced that they would be departing Mildenhall later on. For many who stayed

behind to witness Ian Black lead the pair away in typically exuberant style, this was their last opportunity to see RAF Lightnings in the air. I doubt most other organisers would have realised just how well appreciated this would be.

The result of efforts such as these was evident from the huge audience each year, and the sense of anticipation amongst enthusiasts. At the time, Air Fete set a very high standard and really was the benchmark against which others were judged. To some extent, it still is. JD