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AIR DISPLAY

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04

TOP FETE

John Dunnell looks at the background to this year's military spectacular at Mildenhall

AIR FETE '92 to be held on 23 and 24 May will be the 17th in the USAF's widely acclaimed series of annual air displays at RAF Mildenhall. The show's organising team can be justifiably proud of the event's reputation as one of Europe's finest, with a flying programme famous for the imaginative way in which its contents are organised. Air Fete is thought to be the largest such event organised by the military anywhere in the world and it is certainly the best attended display in Europe. Attendance frequently tops 250,000, making it the biggest annual public show held in East Anglia.

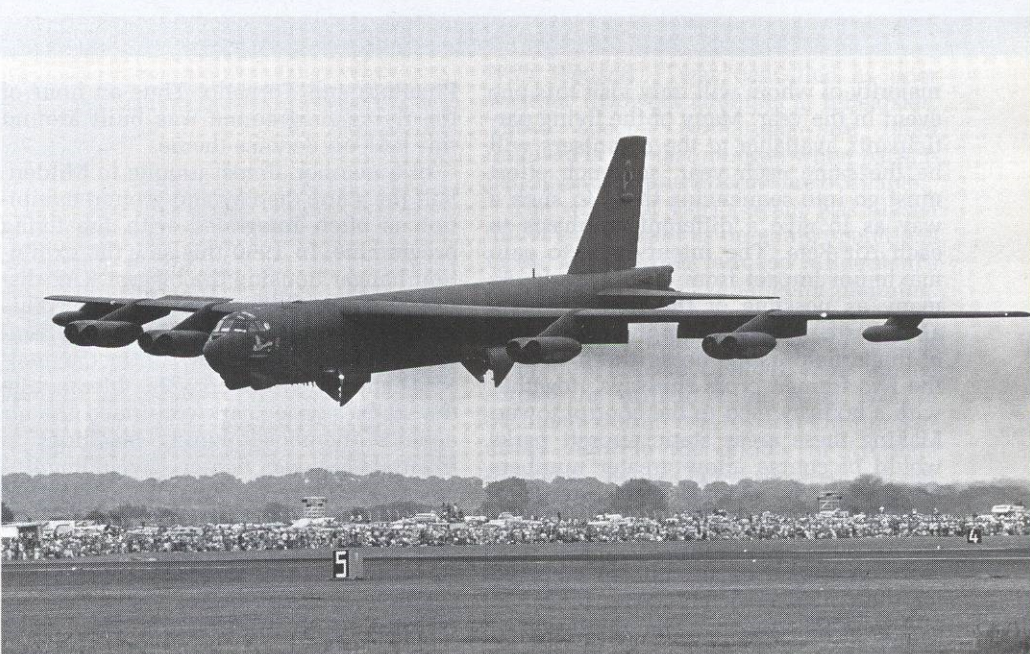
It is often said that enthusiasts make up only a small proportion of any air display's audience. Whilst this may be true it is certainly Air Fete enthusiasts who each year fill the region's hotels, caravan and camp sites. Many arrive at the airfield in the middle of the week before Air Fete to watch routine activities at this busy base before the pace steps up as Air Fete arrivals begin. For its size Britain has more flying displays than any other country and the high level of well informed interest in aviation and military aviation in particular is something that newly-arrived USAF personnel find astonishing.

Recognising this level of interest the show's organising team led, by **Roger Hoeftling**, always attempts to put together an event which places aviation and the audience first. Their view is that Mildenhall is where NATO meets the public and it is never forgotten that as taxpayers the public have already paid for what they have come to see. This in turn leads to admission charges being kept as low as possible. Once the considerable expenses involved in mounting the event have been met, any surplus income is used at unit level to help sustain activities on behalf of the local community and at Wing level to provide support for base recreation facilities.

Under US regulations no sponsorship is allowed as this would inevitably involve making provision for sponsor's hospitality suites restricting the area available to the general public. No advertising is allowed in the souvenir programme which takes the form of a calendar. No photographic film supplier is able to pay for monopoly selling rights - Mildenhall's organisers assume that pho-

Right:
Aircraft in special markings, like this all-black Phantom of No 111 Sqn, add interest to the static displays. *John Dunnell*

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tographers prefer to have access to the best choice of brands available. Only aviation-related trade stands are permitted and these are located behind the control tower to prevent them obstructing the public's view of the flying.

The Air Fete's organisers try to take a long-term view of the audience, the

Top:
As many as possible of the participating aircraft are lined up in close view of the public, generally well positioned for photographers. *PRM*

Above:
Another dramatic performer is the B-52G Stratofortress with its nose down post take off attitude, seen here at 1990's Air Fete. *PRM*





majority of whom will only visit this one event in the year. Many of the flying participants available to the organisers will be the same each year, so much effort must go into sequencing these in such a way as to give a different emphasis to each Air Fete. The intention is to gain maximum impact from each aircraft. As many as possible of the flying display aircraft are operated from the public side of the airfield using the northern ends of the two former 'cross runways', together with a taxiway next to the control tower. Making these areas static aircraft parks would of course allow greater numbers of aircraft to attend each Air Fete. Instead they are used to give spectators an unusual opportunity to watch – at close quarters – as aircraft are prepared for their display before being taxied to and from the runway. The popularity of this feature is illustrated by the sheer numbers of people who crowd into these areas and it is no secret that aircrew and groundcrew enjoy this rare chance to work 'in the limelight'. In fact those who for various reasons have been forced to operate from the south side of the airfield have been known to complain loud and long!

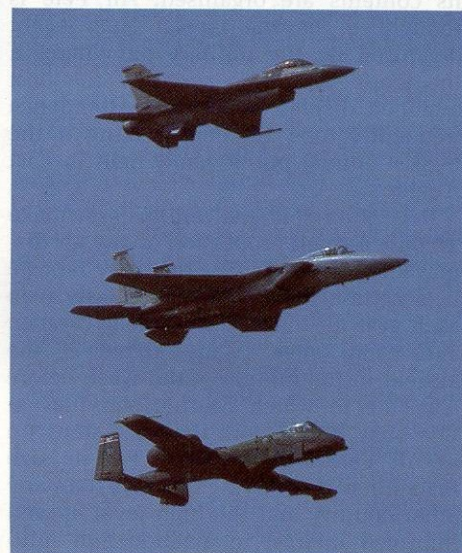
Usually the character of each year's Air Fete is determined by the themes around which the flying and static displays are arranged. For example Air Fete '90, titled 'Winged Victory' was to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Battle of Britain and did so by highlighting the RAF's past and present air defence task. Not unexpectedly Spitfires and Hurricanes were much in evidence at this event and were employed as a curtain-raiser for a set-piece, modern-day air-to-air engagement. This featured defence of the airfield against 'hostile Hawks' by a mixed fighter force comprising Hawks and Tornado F3s, naturally supported by NATO E-3A early warning and RAF Victor in-flight refuelling aircraft. This sequence was immediately followed by solo displays by each of the RAF's current air defence types – Hawk,

Phantom and Tornado. Thus an hour of the flying programme was built around this RAF air defence theme.

In a manner almost unique to Mildenhall the static display and ground exhibition is often integrated with the flying programme. In 1990 this saw the exhibition hangar housing the biggest RAF display held at Mildenhall to date. This included a reproduction of a 1940 operations room as well as, by contrast, a modern fighter control console. Meanwhile the static aircraft park continued the air defence theme containing machines to illustrate pre-war fighter development – courtesy of the Shuttleworth Collection – and coming right up to date with the current equipment of each of No 11 Group's squadrons.

The 'long-term view' of Mildenhall can be seen by contrasting the 1990 show with the 1986 event which also featured air defence, this time celebrating two 50th anniversaries – the Spitfire's first flight and the formation of RAF Fighter Command. This involved a similar set-piece illustrating air defence tactics but featuring Lightnings as the defending fighter force. On this occasion the set piece was followed by a unique formation comprising Tornado, Phantom, Lightning and Hawk which preceded solo displays by each. The static park featured a fighter line-up spanning five decades of RAF air defence equipment including representatives from each RAF fighter squadron.

The presentation of unusual formations has been a welcome feature of many previous Air Fetes and in 1986 there were three! In addition to the RAF air defence four-ship, the Royal Navy concluded its air defence routine with a close flypast by a Sea Harrier and Sea King AEW2. Sunday's show saw the two Thunderbolts – A-10 and P-47 – together for the first time in Europe. Previous years had seen both Corsairs, F4U and A-7 and the pairing of P-51 Mustang and TF-100 Super Sabre (both manufactured by the North American company). In



In 1987 a USAF formation flypast of F-16, F-15 and A-10 was flown at an airshow for the first time. PRM

1987 USAFE provided a modern front-line trio comprising A-10 Thunderbolt II, F-15 Eagle and F-16 Fighting Falcon which flew in a series of formations for the first time at any public event.

This three-ship formation was one of the highlights of Air Fete '87 which marked the 40th anniversary of the formation of the USAF, with over two hours of the flying programme given over to this theme. Types on show ranged from the prewar PT-17 and PT-22 to the first flying appearance in Europe by an FB-111. Mildenhall seems blessed with more than its 'fair share' of first and last appearances. The list includes the first displays in Europe by both the SR-71A Blackbird and the B-1B. Possibly the most popular sight in 1988's static park was the final at Mildenhall of a pair of Lightnings, provided by No 11 Squadron from Binbrook. As the weekend's proceedings drew to a close the Lightnings were moved to the flightline and commentator Roger Hoefling announced that the aircraft would be flown out at the end of the day. For many of the enthusiasts who stayed to witness a typically spectacular departure this would be their

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final chance to see 'in service' Lightnings in the air, for this was certainly their final public airborne appearance.

The thoughtful provision of features such as this contributes to Mildenhall's fine reputation which should never be

taken for granted. Achieving the standards of flying and static display which the public have come to expect is no easy task. Planning for each Air Fete formally starts in September with provisional selection of participants. Response to these requests will usually begin in December but then only on an unofficial basis. Formal news of allocations will not be confirmed until March or April. Clearly being at the beginning of the air show season leaves all too little time for the Air Fete team to get everything organised. Often planning of the flying programme itself cannot be started until three weeks before the event – the insert to accompany the programme is proof-read and printed on the Friday evening of Air Fete weekend!

Problems with weather and aircraft serviceability can disrupt even the best-organised event and much of the organising team's skills go into minimising the possible effects of such problems. In 1987 the long-awaited first public appearance by the newly restored de

Havilland DH88 Comet almost failed to happen as the aircraft was prevented from leaving Hatfield by strong cross winds. First its midweek press preview at Mildenhall was cancelled and the situation prevailed through Saturday's display, conditions also preventing any of the Comet's supporting cast of other de Havilland types from flying. All involved were extremely relieved to see the Comet arrive at Mildenhall just in time to appear as the closing item on Saturday's programme. Permission to fly the A-10, F-16 and F-15 formation was granted too late to allow it to fly on Saturday, the rapidly planned routine almost being called off on Sunday when carefully calculated fuel reserves proved just sufficient to allow for delays caused by non-Air Fete traffic at RAF Lakenheath. Air Fete '88 was especially fraught as the need to co-ordinate with other shows on the continent and in the UK caused additional difficulties. That year's set-piece formation – KC-135R, F-111E plus Spangdahlem based F-4G and F-16C *Wild Weasels* – was cancelled as poor weather thwarted attempts at rehearsals. These special formations are often finalised at the last minute, when participating aircraft and aircrew are available.

The whole of 1991's event was placed under extra strain as on-going operations in the Gulf further reduced Mildenhall's already short time available for planning. During the night before the event large volumes of supplies destined for use in Operation *Provide Comfort* were moved across the airfield from what was to become a public coach park! On the Saturday night in the middle of Air Fete weekend many Gulf-associated aircraft movements took place, with almost all the airfield's population of C-130 Hercules from 'Bravo' Squadron being replaced! In spite of these problems and the poor weather over the weekend a varied collection of aircraft from 11 nations was presented. The public were given their first opportunity to see large numbers of machines used in *Desert Storm*, with many carrying nose art and mission markings. The crowds around many of these aircraft and the reception given to their crews proved this event's popularity once again.

The 'motto' for Air Fete '92 is 'Remembered Skies' and the event will be a special Anglo-American occasion saluting the 50th anniversary of the arrival of the USAAF in Britain. The 1992 audience will include returning former members of the wartime 8th Air Force and flying display former USAAF aircraft will feature alongside current USAF types. Hopefully '92 will see the return of a unique formation as a feature of the programme and it is possible that a Lakenheath based F-15E will make a debut appearance together with more regular Mildenhall favourites.

It is to be anticipated that the organising team's efforts will be rewarded by a large attendance and that Air Fete '92 will help strengthen Mildenhall's reputation as a very special event which sets a consistently high standard.

Left:
The French AF has made regular visits to the Air Fete, including a startling display by this Mirage 2000 in 1990. John Dunnell

Below:
The Air Fete line-up includes vintage aircraft related to the year's theme. In 1990 this Shuttleworth Gladiator was included in the fighter line. PRM

Below centre:
The DH88 Comet made a last minute dash to Mildenhall in 1987 for its public debut on the last day. PRM

Bottom:
The Harrier GR5 made its public display debut in force with eight aircraft in 1989. PRM

