

The 27th Fighter Squadron – a history of firsts

Some facts about the unit, its heraldry, people and aircraft

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In keeping with tradition, the 27th Fighter Squadron is the first operational F/A-22 squadron in the Air Force. Just prior to World War II, the 27th became the first squadron in the 1st Pursuit Group (later the 1st Fighter Group) to be equipped with the then radically new P-38. In the mid-70s the 27th was the first to fly the F-15.

Few military units have such a storied and significant history as the 27th FS. Now in its tenth decade of supporting our national defense, here are some historical nuggets about the *Fightin' Eagles*.

Lt. Frank Luke with the 27th Aero Squadron was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroism during World War I. The Arizona Balloon Buster had 18 aerial victories before he was shot to death by the Germans.

After the war, 27th AS pilots participated in air races. In 1922, Lt. Donald Stace of the 27th AS won the first Mitchell Trophy Race.

Under extreme and austere conditions in the 1920s they tested the effects of cold weather on their aircraft. At times it was so cold, the engines of their P-1 aircraft would not start until steam was forced into the engines to thaw them.

While they were stationed at Selfridge Field, Mich., pilots from the 27th AS put on aerial demonstrations all over the country throughout the 1920s. One of those was at Langley Field in March, 1925. A large silhouette of a battleship on the grass landing strip served as a target, which was successfully strafed and bombed for several duly impressed congressmen.

The 1930s saw more training, additional cold weather tests and more modern aircraft. They participated in several air shows throughout the country, and even though they were in the military, the 27th AS delivered the mail for awhile. One of the pilots in this failed experiment went onto lead Strategic Air Command, then Lt. Curtis E. LeMay.

Distinctive flying squadron emblems tell an immediate story about a unit. When the 27th Aero Squadron arrived in France in the spring of 1918, as a fairly new unit, the men quickly started preparing themselves for initiation into combat. One of the first steps was to consider a squadron insignia.

The pilots of the 27th AS discussed several possibilities before Lt. Malcom Gunn suggested a design he'd seen in New York City. The Anheuser-Busch Brewery used, and continues to use, an eagle for its corporate logo, and a similar design was drawn by a Corporal (first name unknown) Blumberg on May 18, 1918. The other members of the squadron decided it would make an ideal insignia, so the eagle with the outspread wings and talons diving on its prey was accepted.

However, in 1924 a falcon replaced the eagle. According to wing history sources, the War Department did not want to give the appearance of endorsing a brand of beer. During World War II, the falcon was all black. By 1971, the heraldry mentions the bird as still a falcon, albeit with more gray and with a white head. Today that doesn't stop members of the 27th Fighter Squadron from calling themselves the Fightin' Eagles.

Frank L'Esperance was a 27th Fighter Squadron P-38 pilot during the waning months of World War II. Now living in Detroit, he came by the 27th FS on Tuesday to see the Air Force's newest fighter – the Raptor.

Like our Raptors today, the P-38 had two engines and two tails, and was feared by our enemies. Radically different in design and performance, this was the aircraft the 27th Fighter Squadron would use to fight – and help win – WWII. The squadron had the most aerial victories of the 1st Fighter Group during the war – 187 destroyed, 45 probables and 97 aircraft damaged.

Outfitted with four 50 caliber machine guns and one 20 mm cannon clustered in the nose, the Lightning was formidable, and feared. The Germans called it Der Gabelschwanz Teufel, the “Fork Tailed Devil,” and although the group did not participate in the Pacific Theater, the Japanese also dreaded facing it in battle, calling the P-38 the “Whispering Death.”

Tom Maloney of the 27th Fighter Squadron flew Maloney’s Pony, a P-38. The book *Aces in Combat* has a chapter called Descent into Hell, and the title says quite a bit about this ace’s harrowing experiences of aerial warfare off the coast of France. This top ace, eight aerial victories for the group, now lives in Oklahoma and has attended several reunions here over the years.

During WWII, Dick Huber, 27th FS pilot, escorted heavy bombers over Ploesti, Romania. Called the “Taproot of the German might” by Winston Churchill, Ploesti was an important target because of its five oil refineries – and consequently heavily defended. Captain Huber had four aerial victories during the war and his leather flight jacket, complete with a leather 27th FS patch, is on display in downtown Hampton’s Virginia Air and Space Center.

The 27th was part of the first American combat unit to arrive in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia after Iraq invaded Kuwait, arriving on Aug. 7, 1990 – just five days after

Iraq invaded. Although he was assigned to the 94th FS at the time, then Capt. Frank Gorenc was part of the cadre of pilots who flew with the 27th during the first days of Desert Shield / Desert Storm.

After that conflict, the 27th FS flew thousands of missions in support of Operation Southern Watch, Provide Comfort and Operation Northern Watch.

Since Sept. 11, 2001, the Fightin' Eagles have regularly supported Operation Noble Eagle, flying combat air patrols to protect our nation's capital.

With today's Takeoff to Raptor Initial Operational Capability Ceremony, the men and women of the 27th FS are at the ready for the future, the F/A-22 and supporting the nation's national security needs.