



U.S. AIR FORCE

This Week in USAF and PACAF History 13-19 April 2009



16 Apr 1916 **The Lafayette Escadrille was established.** This unit (photo below) was a squadron of largely of American volunteer pilots flying and fighting for the French Air Service during World War I. The planes, their mechanics, and the pilot uniforms were French, as was the commander, Captain Georges Thenault. The squadron was originally named the *Escadrille Américaine*. For reasons of international diplomacy, the unit was re-named to honor the French military hero who aided the American Army during the American Revolution.



15-16 Apr 1928 The **first flight across the Arctic Ocean** was made by World War I aviator and Arctic explorer Carl Benjamin Eielson, together with Australian explorer Hubert Wilkins. The flight from Point Barrow across the top of Greenland to Spitsbergen covered 2,200 miles and took 20 hours. Eielson was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross and won the 1928 Harmon Trophy for the greatest American aviation feat of the year.

Eielson died in a crash the following year while attempting to rescue 15 passengers of a cargo vessel trapped in ice near Siberia. In 1948, Eielson AFB, Alaska was named in his honor.

18 Apr 1942 **Doolittle Raid.** Colonel James H. “Jimmy” Doolittle led 16 B-25s from the aircraft carrier *Hornet* to bomb Tokyo and other sites in the first U.S. air raid on Japan. Although the raid caused only minor damage, it raised U.S. morale and damaged that of the Japanese, caused the Japanese to divert resources to their defensive perimeter, and was a factor in the Japanese decision to send their carrier fleet to its ultimate disaster at Midway.

Early sighting by Japanese ships forced the Doolittle raiders to launch prematurely from the carrier *Hornet*, forcing most of them into crash landings in China.

Doolittle thought he would be court-martialed on his return, but instead was

awarded the Medal of Honor. (See photo above of the B-25s on the *Hornet* flight deck.)





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18 Apr 1943 **Yamamoto Shootdown.** Flying P-38 aircraft over Bougainville, 1st Lt. Rex T. Barber and Capt. Thomas G. Lanphier, Jr., intercepted and shot down a Japanese bomber carrying Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, the Japanese officer who had planned the attacks on Pearl Harbor and Midway. The interception, meticulously planned and executed on the first anniversary of the Doolittle raid, deprived the Japanese of one of their most brilliant naval officers. Maj. John W. Mitchell led the flight of 16 P-38s in which Barber and Lanphier flew.

16 Apr 1956 **Lockheed unveiled its F-104A Starfighter** at Palmdale. General Otto P. Weyland observed, "This is much more than just another fighter, it is a significant and tremendous step forward in our progress in supersonic flight."

19 Apr 1967 **MEDAL OF HONOR.** Major Leo K. Thorsness earned a Medal of Honor by protecting a mission to rescue downed airmen in North Vietnam. While flying an F-105 with low fuel, Thorsness shot down one MiG-17, damaged another, and drove off three more. Despite his urgent need for fuel, Major Thorsness elected to recover at a forward operating base, allowing another aircraft in emergency condition to refuel from an aerial tanker. Shortly after this incident, Thorsness was shot down, captured, and held prisoner until his release on March 4, 1973.



(See AF photo above of Major Thorsness and his regular backseater, Capt. Harold Johnson, who flew 93 Wild Weasel missions over North Vietnam. Johnson received the Air Force Cross).

14 Apr 1970 The **Minuteman III deployment began** in North Dakota when Minot's 91 SMW accepted its first missile. It arrived on board a C-141 in a flight from Hill AFB in the first airlift of an operational Minuteman III.



14 Apr 1972 **BATTLE OF AN LOC.** Through 30 June, C-130s airdropped 4,853 tons in 359 sorties to the besieged garrison at An Loc to prevent a North Vietnamese take over. The C-130s used high-altitude airdrops for the first time to resupply US forces. By the time the road routes to An Loc reopened on 23 July, the C-130s had flown 763 sorties to deliver 10,081 tons of supplies. B-52 attacks provided essential close air support to embattled troops in An Loc.



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16 Apr 1973 **USAF B-52s resumed bombing against North Vietnamese positions** in Laos following reports that communist forces overran a town in the Plaine des Jarres.

15 Apr 1974 **CAS Fly-Off.** Under Congressional pressure, the Air Force began a flyoff between the Fairchild A-10 and the LTV A-7D Corsair at McConnell AFB. The competition lasted through 9 May and clearly showed the A-10 to be more capable in the close air support (CAS) mission. The A-10 carried a larger ordnance payload and a more lethal gun—the GAU-8



30mm cannon. The A-10 was judged to be more survivable after being hit by enemy ground fire and its maneuverability made it less vulnerable to air-to-air losses. The pilots felt the A-10s maneuverability would be also a great asset in providing effective CAS to ground units, especially during limited visibility or low ceiling weather conditions.

14 Apr 1986 **Operation EL DORADO CANYON.** The US retaliated against Libya for its involvement in terrorism with an airstrike, using 24 F-111s from RAF Lakenheath supported by five EF-111s from RAF Upper Heyford. Navy aircraft also struck Libya from the USS America and USS Coral Sea (14 A-6Es, six A-7s and six F/A-18s). The aircraft successfully hit targets at Benina Airfield, Benghazi Military Barracks, and Aziziyah Barracks in Tripoli. During a long, circuitous flight around France and Spain, the F-111s were air-refueled by 28 KC-10 Extenders and KC-135 Stratotankers, flying out of RAF Fairford and RAF Mildenhall. The tankers refueled the F-111 strike force four times, maintaining radio silence during the entire mission. The US lost one F-111 in the attack. On the return flight to the UK, the tankers refueled the F-111s two more times. (Artwork at right by Ronald Wong.)





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19-24 Apr 1993 Units in Alaska participated in the **Air Force's first combined exercise with the Russian air force**, a search-and-rescue exercise in Siberia.

17 Apr 1999 The **first RQ-1 Predator flight into a combat zone** was made during Operation ALLIED FORCE when the Predator performed reconnaissance over Serbia.

13 Apr 2003 **Bomber evacuation.** Due to the proximity of Typhoon Kujira, all 7th Air Expeditionary Wing B-52s, B-1Bs and their supporting airmen and equipment, evacuated from Andersen AFB, Guam. By 14 Apr 2003, the 7th AEW recovered its combat readiness even while the bombers were temporarily stationed at Fairchild AFB, WA and Hickam AFB, HI.

16 Apr 2004 **MACKAY TROPHY.** Near Kharbut, Iraq, in near-zero visibility, two USAF HH-60G helicopters were dispatched to rescue a U.S. Army CH-47 Chinook helicopter that had crashed in a sandstorm. The brown-out conditions left the rescue crews' infrared and night vision goggles ineffective, making navigation extremely difficult. Flying through multiple surface-to-air missile attacks, the HH-60s located, rescued and evacuated all five Army crash survivors. For their outstanding actions, the crews earned the Mackay Trophy. (The photo below shows HH-60Gs in southwest Asia during Operation SOUTHERN WATCH.)



18 Apr 2005 **The 535th Airlift Squadron activated at Hickam AFB, HI.** The 535 AS crews would fly the C-17A Globemaster IIIs due to arrive at Hickam in early 2006.