



83d Fighter Interceptor Squadron: A Brief Unit History

By John A. Trumbull

Hamilton Field has had a special relationship with the 83d Fighter Interceptor Squadron. It is one of the three squadrons within 78th Fighter Group. Recently the Novato History Museum was given a partial copy of the Air Force's official history of the 83d. Without prejudice against its sister Squadrons, the 82nd and 84th, I am extracting and paraphrasing from that history for the Guild's newsletter.

On February 9, 1942, long after the construction and activation of Hamilton Field in 1935, the 83d Pursuit Squadron (Interceptor) was activated as one of three squadrons in the new 78th Pursuit Group at Baer Field in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

By May, the entire Group had moved to Hamilton Field for training. The sojourn in Novato was short, however, because November 24 found the unit aboard the *Queen Elizabeth* bound for England. Shortly after arrival the P-38s with which the unit had trained were stripped away and sent to the Mediterranean theater for use there, and the 84th was issued P-47 fighter aircraft.



This P-38 "Lightning" went into the bay off HAFB in early 1943. The wingspan was 51 feet and the loaded takeoff weight was 21,000 pounds with a top speed at altitude of 410 MPH.

After a period of retraining and familiarization, the unit became operational at the Duxford airdrome in April 1943. [Duxford is due north of London up MII about 40 miles as the P-47

flies.] The unit's commanding officer, Major James Stone made the 83's first "kill" on May 13, 1943 by downing a German FW190. The 83d arrived after the critical days of the aerial defense of Great Britain against the Luftwaffe, but participated in protection against later attacks. It also participated in the invasion of France. On one day, June 6, 1944, this squadron alone flew 48 sorties totaling almost 2000 hours, shooting 27,000 rounds of 50 caliber machine gun ammunition and dropping nearly 80 tons of bombs,. This feat earned all personnel a bronze star.

In August 1944, the squadron downed 15 enemy aircraft in one day while escorting allied bombers over Arnheim, Germany, earning a Distinguished Unit Citation. In September 1944, the tally was 61 aircraft destroyed, 28 damaged and more than 1,000 surface vehicles damaged or destroyed in its low level ground support mission.

Then the unit was upgraded to the P-51 airplane, and pulled out of action for retraining and familiarization. When the 83d returned to active status in January 1945, they had one day in which they destroyed 14 enemy aircraft and damaged 6 more. On March 19, 1945, forty six Mustangs from the 83d tackled an estimated at 125 German aircraft in one flight, accounting for 23 “kills.” They flew over the Normandy invasion, and the unit earned Presidential Unit Citations for their work over Holland (September 17 to 23, 1944) and over Czechoslovakia (April 16, 1945).

On May 7 the war ended. In October the

unit was returned to Camp Kilmer, New Jersey and inactivated on October 18, 1945.

In November 1948, the 83d was reactivated as the 83d Fighter Squadron (Jet), 78th Fighter Group Air Defense Command, 4th Air Force and again assigned to Hamilton Air Force Base at Novato, California. Air Force reorganizations continued throughout 1949 and 1950 while the 83d trained at HAFB on the F-89 “Scorpion” jet plane.



Northrop's F-89J "Scorpion" weighed in over 21 tons, with a wingspan of nearly 60 feet and a top speed of 635 MPH using its after burner. It was armed with rockets rather than guns, including the Genie nuclear rockets in its last version.

The 83d trained in the F-86D and participated in the development of the improved F-86L until January 26, 1958, when Lt. Col. Raymond E. Evans, the unit commander, led a flight of three new F-104A “Starfighters” into Hamilton. This marked the 83d as the first ultra-sonic fighter squadron in the world. (Unhappily on March 3, 1958,



P-47D "Thunderbolt" weighed in at 7 tons with a 41 foot wingspan. It could fly at 430 MPH and with external fuel tanks it had a range of about 1,000 miles.

In July 1951 the 83d was transferred to Paine AFB where it was issued first F-84s then F-86D “Sabres.” In the summer of 1955, due to another reorganization, the unit was returned to Hamilton AFB, where its sister unit, the 84th, flying the F-89 “Scorpions,” had been standing guard over the West Coast since 1948.

Lt. Col Evans lost his life in the first operational accident of the F-104A.) Demonstrating the capabilities of their new plane on May 7, 1958, Major H.C. “Scrappy” Johnson, the new unit commander, set a new world altitude record on 91,243 feet. Less than two weeks later Capt. W.W. Irwin set a new world speed record of 1,404 MPH.



The P-51D “Mustang” flown by 78th FG commander, Col John D. Landers, showing his personal paint scheme Weighing about 6 tons, with a 37-foot wingspan this plane could fly about 1,000 miles with a top speed of 437 MPH.

Field pictorial history book available through the Novato Historical Guild.) For three months starting in mid September, the 83d stood daylight alerts on Formosa. In mid December they returned to Hamilton AFB where they resumed their 5-minute alert status here.

In mid 1960 a decision was made to deactivate the 83d and turn their aircraft over to the Air National Guard. After reconsideration, however, the unit was retained and rearmed with new F-101B aircraft. It was with this plane that the squadron won the coveted Hughes Trophy in August 1961. This trophy was awarded annually to the best fighter squadron in the world, and the judges declared, after an intensive and all-inclusive tactical review, that the 83d was 62 percent better than the number two contender. (The museum has a picture of the trophy, but the cup, which was at one time kept at the Hamilton Officers Club has disappeared.)

Other notable achievements of the 83d during 1961 was receipt of the Air Defense Command’s “A” award for outstanding achievement in September. It also fielded a team that took second place in the air force rocket and missile firing competition at Tyndall AFB, Florida. Numerous other awards were accumulated during its combat-ready years of 1962 and 1963. An award, which is indicative of the spirit of the unit’s personnel, was the awarding of an “outstanding” rating after a surprise and exacting evaluation made after the unit had been informed of its pending deactivation, and the transfer of one-third of its pilots to other

Becoming combat ready as a unit in August 1958, the unit was ripe for deployment to Formosa in response to the tension then flaring between the Nationalist and Communist Chinese. Not being capable of flying that distance, the 12 planes used by the 24 deployed crews were air freighted from Hamilton Field in D-124 cargo planes. (See pictures at pages 86 and 87 of the Hamilton



The Lockheed F-104C “Starfighter” is shown above. The 83d had the F-104A whose thin 22 foot straight wing in the era of swept wings could carry the 23,000 pound plane at speeds up to 1,300 MPH.

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units. The final award was the Outstanding Unit Award for the dates from July 1, 1960 through November 15, 1961, which was presented at the formal decommissioning ceremony on May 3, 1963.

Novato does not miss the noise of the fighters leaving Hamilton enroute to possible threats as far



The McConnell F101B "Voodoo" had a swept wing span of less than 40 feet, but it could carry 2 external nuclear rockets as well as internal bombs or rockets to a height of 50,000 in under 6 minutes and then attack at 1100 MPH.

away as Alaska. There used to be times when it sounded as though the heavens were being ripped open. Conversations were paused while the sound passed away. New residents looking for the plane where the sound was never saw it, because the plane was long gone over Mt. Burdell by the time we heard it. Nevertheless, many of us slept easier in those days knowing that someone was keeping a close eye on the big red bear to the north. We historians knew that in the 1800's Russians were down in our neighborhood hunting sea otters, so the idea that they might return was not impossible. (Remember Fort Ross?) We own a belated "Thank you" to the 83d and the other units staffing Hamilton for their vigilance and sacrifice to keep us peace loving civilians safe.

Scale models of all these planes painted as they appeared at HAFB will be on display at the new Hamilton military museum in the future. It is hoped that the display of E. E. Ewry's models will be open to viewing next summer. The Guild is in the process of rehabilitating the interior of the original firehouse building, utilizing volunteer labor to the greatest extent possible. If you have artifacts or literature pertaining to Hamilton AFB you would like to donate, please contact the museum at 897-4320. If you would like to work on the museum project, contact John Trumbull at 897-1617.



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