

# A 'FOX ABLE' FLIGHT TO EUROPE IN THE F-86F

*by Gary Sparks*

As I stopped at the main gate at George AFB, CA., I saw a flight of 4 F-86's on the break coming in to land. I was impressed with the lead's pattern as he pulled it pretty tight, and in that era, 1954, most of us still liked to make a tight pattern even with the modified 360 overhead we were forced to go to in the jets. (I found out later that the pattern I was impressed with was flown by the commander of my new squadron.) The gate guard gave me directions to Base Personnel and I drove there to find out where I was going to be assigned.

I had been flying the F-84G & F models in the 405th FBW at Langley AFB VA, but wanted to go to Europe and, more importantly, I wanted to fly the '86. The 21st FBW at George, my new wing, had the Sabre and was going to France. Personnel informed me that I was being assigned to the 416th FBS, and that it was commanded by Major Morgan R. Beamer, who had requested that I be assigned to his squadron. I was very pleased as I had been in his squadron in Korea during the 'Police Action and had flown 100 combat missions in the RF-51 at K-14 while under his command. He was a great commander and at that stage of my career, the finest fighter pilot I had ever known. Today, after flying fighters for 20 years, that statement is still true.

In the next several days I checked out in the F-86 and felt it was a vast improvement over the F-84. We practiced almost daily, mainly HARS, LARS, and some air to air. Occasional cross-countries were permitted and I lost no time in returning to Langley AFB and showing off the '86 to my envious former squadron mates. The first action directly related to the flight to France was getting fitted for the infamous exposure suits. George AFB in July is never cool and I think they most have been setting records that year. Even the water in the swimming pool at the O'Club where we checked for leaks in the suits seemed to be 90 degrees or so. It was a very unpleasant way to spend the afternoon. But, after a couple of sessions, we were all fitted and the next time we saw the exposure suits was at Loring AFB, Maine.

On the 13 December 1954 our squadron left George AFB in flights of four, with 15 minutes intervals between flights. Our route was; Clovis AFB NM, Alexandria AFB LA, Shaw AFB SC, Dover AFB DE, Loring AFB ME, Goose Bay AB Laborador, BW1 Greenland, Keflavik AB Iceland, Prestwick AB Scotland, and then on to France. We ROned at each base, and in some cases stayed much longer than one night. We fell under the old Ferry Command, and weather restrictions were much more restricted than the normal TAC limits. We had a marine pilot, Capt. George Dodenhoff on exchange duty with us, and up to that time, there had never been a marine on a High Flight to Europe. George was looking forward to the flight, but while at Dover, he suffered a kidney stone attack, which grounded him. When he finally passed the stone and was back on flying status, our squadron was long gone. He wound up catching a C-54 to Keflavik, where he replaced a pilot from the squadron following us who had broken his ankle. So he at least got to make part of a High Flight.

We had stayed pretty well on a one night RON schedule until we reached Loring AFB. Looking at my Form 5, we got there the 20th and left on 30 December. Loring was a SAC base, and many of you will recall that SAC had a requirement to wear the uniform with a white shirt and a black bow tie in the O'Club after 1800 hours. We briefed every morning at 0500 regardless of what the forecast had been the night before, and this resulted in a lot of needless briefings. Finally, we got a "Go" on the morning of the 23rd. The weather briefer told us he expected scattered snow storms that after noon, but we would be in Goose Bay by then, so no problem I was flying No.3 on Major Beamer, who was leading the squadron, and we were waiting in the cockpit for the signal to start engines when the snowflakes started. Within 3 or 4 minutes you couldn't even see the Base Ops building. Major Bearner's crew chief came over and said, "Major Beamer said we should all go inside and wait till the snow shower ends." 24 hours later, it ended.

It took them two days to clear the taxiways and runways. The weather forecaster was asked several times about his definition of "scattered snow showers" the few times he ventured into Club after that storm! Before we finally got out of Loring, Bearer shuffled the lineup of his flight. Originally, we had a lieutenant colonel "headquarters-type" flying wing on Major Beamer, while I was a first lieutenant leading the element. The lieutenant colonel suggested to Beamer that he felt it might be more fitting for him to lead the element, and as Beamer told me later, normally when a superior officer suggests something to a major, the major takes the suggestion to heart. So, when we finally left Loring, I was flying Two on Major Beamer. I'm sure the colonel had been a very good fighter pilot at one time, but his years in staff jobs, and flying four hours a month didn't do a great deal for his proficiency. The join-up he made coming out of Loring didn't result in a mid-air, but it was a bit more exciting than a normal join-up!

I see by my Form 5 that we got into Goose Bay on the 30 December and departed there on 11 January 1955. As I recall, there was a reasonable amount of "Spirits" consumed on that New Years Eve. We knew we weren't leaving the next morning and, to be truthful, the 8 hours between bottle and throttle was not always adhered to in that era, specially by young fighter pilots and some of the old fighter pilots as well. One thing I recall on the morning of departure is that I put my clothing bag on the wing while I was making my walkaround, it fell off the wing and the plastic shattered. I think it was something like 25 below that morning and the plastic got too brittle to be pliable.

We had been airborne only a short time when the colonel got an opportunity to show his ability as a leader. Four called and said his tanks weren't feeding. After he had done all the necessary checks to get them to feed with no results, Major Beamer told the element lead to take Four, return to Goose and get the tanks fixed. Beamer & I pressed on. The two of us continued to BW-1 and were lucky enough to encounter a T bird when we broke out on the letdown, and its pilot led us up the fiord to the runway. The rest of the squadron arrived later on, along with our element after Four's tank problem was fixed.

We got airborne the next morning and the whole squadron made it to Iceland that day. We weren't quite as lucky with the weather while in Iceland. Referring again to my Form 5, it shows we left there for Scotland on the 18th. Iceland sure isn't the greatest R & R area, but I did luck out and encountered a Republic tech rep who I had known from Langley. He was a fun-loving bachelor type like myself and knew quite a number of the beautiful, blonde Icelandic gals. They certainly helped make the time pass a bit faster.

Upon arrival in Scotland, they didn't have adequate room in the BOQ's so we were quartered at a great hotel in Troon. Our permanent base in France was to be Chambley, but they were not ready for us, so, temporarily, we would be flying out of Toul AB. The squadron ahead of us had lost a plane going into Toul because of GCA difficulties (the pilot got out OK), so USAFE thought it prudent to send flight leaders from the 48th FBW at Chaumont AB France over to Scotland to 'lead us into France'. In retrospect, this had to be a bit of an insult to our very competent squadron commanders and flight leaders. They sent some great guys though and we all got along fine.

Finally, we departed Scotland on 29 Jan 1955 and arrived at Chaumont AB where we were greeted with a great deal of enthusiasm and an equal amount of beer provided by the 48th FBW. The next day we flew to Toul AB, led by our own squadron commander and flight leader. It had taken almost seven weeks to travel from George AFB to Toul AB, which is a long time to live out of an F-86! It was a very interesting trip and one that I don't think any of us will ever forget.