

# CHAMBLEY AIR BASE

By Jean-Pierre HOEHN

*Note: The first picture (the aerial photograph), is a mistake of the author. It is not Chambley AB, but an aerial view of Phalsbourg AB*

When, in 1973, I went in Chambley, Meurthe-et-Moselle, as a pilgrim, I was astonished by the poor condition of the air base. It appeared as a phantom-city, with ruined buildings, broken windows, broken down doors, and a wild vegetation had already grown up even through the concrete pavement; everything laying in a silence and in a retirement quite common in this region called “deep Lorraine”. On a wall of the base operations building, and even the lack of one letter, the inscription was still noticeable. It was quite easy to dream on the time the base was full with frenzied activity, and roaring engines. But Chambley virtually ceased living since 1965, and today, it is hard to imagine the inhabitants of the New World lived here, among this landscape of smooth hills and green pasture lands, in an environment probably very different of theirs.

Searching through old documents telling the base’s life in its early years, you discover some feelings of a base in the background from everything, and remarks such as “hard housing conditions” are quite frequent. By the way, it is the leitmotif we find in the history of each French USAF air base, consequently to a flying build-up, in order to face an imminent threat. The main goal was to host the aircrafts in a ready infrastructure, meanwhile the men and manpower- and eventually families – would have to content with tents and trailers set in the middle of a muddy area. About this subject, Chambley was not an exception!

The fact that the base’s history is quite unknown may be due to its relative retirement, because of its geographic retirement. It is also true that, no particular event occurred in the operational life of Chambley AB, even if it stayed under active status for a time much more long than better known bases such as Chaumont, Phalsbourg, Etain or Dreux. To sum up Chambley history, let’s remember:

- 1955-58: the 21st FBW era and its F-86F in charge with nuclear strike. From 1959 to 1960, the base turned under stand by status just after the removal of strike units from French soil.
- 1961-62: arrival of F-84F and RF-84F during the Berlin crisis.
- 1963: detachment of F-84F under 366th TFW’s control.
- 1965: creation of the 25th TRW equipped with E/RB-66. From 1966 to 1967 the base is evacuated and closed.

Contrary to other bases located in the east of France and devoted to nuclear strike (like Chaumont, Toul and Etain), we can notice that Chambley is the only base never equipped with supersonic F-100. Its true life seems to have ended with the F-86F departure, waiting for the Super Sabre that never arrived, because of the quick exodus started in 1959, of all american nuclear strike units based in France. But like other USAF evacuated and temporarily turned into stand by status bases, Chambley knew different awakenings, even the first one occurred after three years.

At these controverted times, the Americans never mentioned, officially at least, the base’s closure. Living with a reduced manpower in charge with the buildings and facilities maintenance, the base waited for an eventual reinforcement of US forces in Europe in front of a communist threat that would have increased. So every day, the base ticks over, waiting for the Berlin crisis to awake it back to life. In between, the base is mainly used as a diverting base used by units from Toul, and some aircrafts even make GCA, technical stopovers or

refuelling stops. No, really, it was not considering leaving Chambley moreover after have spent millions of dollars to make the base totally operational from 1955, only three years earlier. On a political and strategic point of view, the cold war was far from its end, besides the following years would confirm this stressed situation, with the Cuban missiles crisis, the build-up of the Berlin wall, and in 1964, the beginning of the Vietnam War.

## **21<sup>st</sup> FBW “Fortitudo et preparatio”**

How and why a 75 fighter’s wing came into France, defending a certain ideology? It deserves a flashback on its origins, its past of Fighter Group, far away from its position of main resident of Chambley AB.

On april, 21<sup>st</sup> 1944, the 21<sup>st</sup> FG is settled on Wheeler field, on Oahu island, in the Hawaii territories. From here, it is transferred to Iwo Jima where it flies escort missions on P-38 for the B-29 launched against Japan. In October 1946, the unit is disbanded on the Guam Island. This is for the old history of this group, we find years later, at the heart of Lorraine.

On January, 1<sup>st</sup> of 1953, the 21<sup>st</sup> FBW is resurrected at Georges AFB, California. During a short span, it flies F-51 *Mustang* before receiving its *Sabre*. With this equipment, the Wing has in charge tactical training of its crews, and takes part to reinforcement of the US air defence. Between November and December 1954, rumour runs that the wing is about to join USAFE to assume a nuclear strike mission. In that goal, the 21<sup>st</sup> FBW receives F-86F-35, first of the type being adapted to carry a tactical nuclear bomb of 540 kg (Mk 6 type) under the left wing, and equipped with a LABS system allowing to the plane and its pilot to get away as quick as possible from the explosion. After have painted the landscape of the history, the materials, and the mission of the unit, let’s tell now how the wing arrived, by its own wings, at Chambley AB.

While its still at Georges AF, the 21<sup>st</sup> is told in the middle of 1954 that it may join the USAFE, and as a result, turn under NATO’s control. Even before receiving the official directives, some officers, including colonel Rowland, Wing Commander, make a journey to France for reconnaissance of their new home.

Among the 1510 USAF members about to move to Chambley, except the pilots, you can find some aircrafts techs, cooks, doctors, nurses, lorry drivers, plumbers, communication specialists... in brief, a complete and independent team capable to ensure the activity of any air base, anywhere from Lorraine countryside to Korean rice plantation. For the anecdote, just before the great rush, each man had to pass through the medical checks, including vaccines; Chambley was indeed a quite unknown place, without speaking about hygiene in France....

On July, 15<sup>th</sup> of 1954 the 21<sup>st</sup> FBW begins to prepare some 2000 tons of skills, about 5 million dollars at that time, which destination was France. Such a stock included 374 vehicles such as runway tractors, engine starters, a big crane in case of crash, lorries, jeeps, and of course, firemen lorries. From this point of view, the French economy did not win a lot. But all this material was even not available here, corresponding to American USAF standards!

In the three squadrons of the wing, the 72<sup>nd</sup>, 416<sup>th</sup> and 531<sup>st</sup> FBS’s, the activity gains its highest peak but for other reasons. The pilots indeed revise their long flights procedures and get more familiar with all the instruments of the dashboard. The youngest pilots seriously begin to worry when they are told that “*in France, you will find as much fog and rain as you find sun here. So get ready for the worst!*” Finally, the raw recruits travelled by ship, only the elder pilots, having more experience, flew the *Sabre* to Europe. Distance from California: 12872 km.

On November 25<sup>th</sup>, the main part of the wing, some 1200 men join the Houston harbour by train, and come onboard of the MSTS *General Leroy Elting*. The aerial elements left George

AFB on December 12<sup>th</sup>, and the last men of the unit, some techs having to take care of the *Sabre* all along the journey embarked a MATS transport plane. The first stop is Dover, Delaware, starting spot for the air bridge to join the old continent.

On December 12<sup>th</sup>, all of the three squadrons are ready for the “Fox Able” operation. By small groups, the pilots gains their own aircrafts, the arms full with bags with their personal things, to load on every tiny space available onboard of their jet. For example, the ideal place to load a pair of shoes, a jacket and a cap was the ammunition rack, emptied before, of course, and the uniform, or a civil suit was perfectly arranged over the radio equipment, or between the guns. The American pilots, accustomed to these long distance flights, became pretty well resourceful. Once the “luggage” attached, the fighters took off four by four. The first squadron to leave George is the 72<sup>nd</sup>, led by Colonel Rowland, Wing Co, and Colonel R.C. Franklin, Squadron Co. On the following day, it is the 416<sup>th</sup>'s turn, the 531<sup>st</sup> being the last one.

A point about the north Atlantic crossing flights in the 50's is important. Generally speaking, most of aircrafts were flown in small groups by pilots specialized in ferry-flight. In that case, operation's name was “High Flight”.

On the other hand, when a whole wing moved with men, panes and materials, it was referred as a “Fox Able” operation.

First, the *Sabre* from the 21<sup>st</sup> FBW had to join Dover, in the North-East of the USA, passing through New Mexico, Louisiana, and South Carolina. A last jump to join the Maine, close to the Canadian border, before starting the next 1500 km to Goose Bay, Labrador, compulsory springboard to Europe. From there, the aircrafts join Narsarsuak, South Greenland, after an exclusively over water flight. In that part of the crossing, it was better to be patient, because of bad weather that complicated the journey to Iceland. But once arrived there, Scotland, and the Prestwick field were not more far away. For these kinds of flights, pilots wore a special boiler suit, and they were told as follow: *“Your chance to stay alive depends on two things if you ever have to eject and fall into the frozen water: your survival suit, and your rescue boat. We know that this tight suit is deformed and uncomfortable and so tightened at the wrist that you'll have to use baby talc. But keep this in mind: in the water without it, you don't have more than 3 minutes of life expectancy in the water. Dressed with this suit, you will have about 15 mn to get onboard your boat, waiting for rescue”*. So everybody did as told, with no comment.

Only 31 days and 13 hours after have left George, fighters of the first squadron take off from Prestwick to “Shatoo-Roo” (Châteauroux with the American pronunciation). This US base located in the Indre department has to host the F-86F of the 72<sup>nd</sup>, because the base in Chambley is not ready yet for hosting an operational unit. The two others squadron would operate from a very closer site, Toul-Rosières. The whole unit invests Chambley only in the early days of July of 1955. Few times before the *Sabre* arrival, the main problem was to make the base viable, and especially about the housing aspect, and other daily services necessary for the families about to arrive. So, on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1955, the 862<sup>nd</sup> Engineer Aviation Battalion of US Army arrives at Chambley with bulldozers to terrace an area for the trailer park. Roads are drawn, water pipes are settled, and after six working months, ten hours worked a day, the base was only 50% finished. In the end of 1955, there were enough trailers to accommodate 175 families. On early July, a lot of work remains to be done to ensure people having the same living conditions than in George AFB, weather apart. So a lot of volunteers do not hesitate to give a hand after their working hours or during week-ends, finalizing the store, and the nursery school.

In the same time, the 21<sup>st</sup> flies a lot, and discover its new flying environment. Just eight months after they arrived in France, eight *Sabre* fly the return journey to take part of the “All USAF bombing and Gunnery meet” set in Nellis, Nevada. Two months earlier, the unit

already moved to Wheelus, Libya, for a USAFE bombing and shooting contest where it won every award! A former magazine, *Twelve Air Force Review*, wrote on October 1955, about the 21<sup>st</sup>: “after have flown half of the world and have dug the French soil to build an air base, men of the 21<sup>st</sup> FBW proved that days and weeks spent training were not in vain. We can now affirm this Wing is one of the most efficient of the whole 12<sup>th</sup> Air Force.”

During three years, apart of the recurrent Wheelus shooting and bombing trainings, the 21<sup>st</sup> ensures its main mission: the nuclear strike over the iron curtain. Contrary to the polemic and of General De Gaulle’s permanent concern, it doesn’t seem that Chambley, neither Etain nor Chaumont, did stand nuclear alert with armed fighters. Indeed, regarding to several testimonies I collected from pilots of this time, it appears that armed aircrafts stood alert in Germany (RFA) instead of standing alert from France. Of course, there were some rotational moving of planes and crews between the two countries, but during these flights, no plane did carry a nuclear bomb. It was only mounted once in the alert hanger.

Instead of this crucial mission, the F-86F of 21<sup>st</sup> FBW often used to fly low altitude over France, pilots simulating attacks on different targets, using the LABS procedure. Apart navigation flights alone or in formation, life was quite banal for a *Sabre* pilot, so there is not many testimonies of great dogfights between Canadian, French or American aircrafts. The nuclear strike was an ungrateful mission, not really envied.

In these times, the American pilot had a special reputation, due to his right way to fly, strict about rules and procedures, like the Canadians by the way... USAF’s politics was strict: ensure its role with the less of incidents. To have a look on the flying style of USAF pilots, you had to visit the Chaumont air base to admire the aerobatic team of the *Skyblazers*.

The 21<sup>st</sup> carried on its mission from Chambley until 1958. Contrary to other units having the same mission in France, the wing was not equipped with the F-100 *Super Sabre* during its time spent in Europe, and when General De Gaulle came back; all the American nuclear strike wings had to get away from France.

On February, 8<sup>th</sup> 1958, the 21<sup>st</sup> FBW is officially disbanded in Chambley AB. Some tells that the aircrafts were given to others NATO air forces, and since that time, the glory days of Chambley AB stopped. Never again such a unit composed with so much fighters would settle here. However, the base was not abandoned, and it still used several times in the following years.

## **21<sup>st</sup> FBW, the end**

While wings of Toul, Etain, and Chaumont carry on their mission from Germany and Great Britain, the 21<sup>st</sup> leaves Europe for good. It will be found very far, being resuscitated on July 1958 at Misawa, Japan, with F-100D/F of course under the 21<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing designation, with only two squadrons, the 416<sup>th</sup> and 531<sup>st</sup> TFS. These *Super Sabre* still wear the wonderful decoration: coloured stripe with stars on the nose, and chevrons with the squadron colour on the tail.

On June, 1960, the wing is once more disbanded in Misawa but the squadrons don’t leave Japan before the spring of 1964, to join England AFB, Louisiana, and then integrate the 3<sup>rd</sup> TFW which then moves to Bien Hoa, South Vietnam. Today (*in 1991*) the 21<sup>st</sup> TFW flies F-15 From Elmendorf, Alaska.

## **1959-1962**

After the departure of the 21<sup>st</sup> FBW, it is emptiness. Current population is only one quarter of before, and the base turned into DOB, just like other bases evacuated at this time. Before the base turned into stand by in February 1958, a USAFE’s staff document reports that Chambley

AB passed under control of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Detachment of the 49<sup>th</sup> TFW of Etain, but probably for a very short time, as this unit also left France the same year. Chambley remains as a DOB until October 1961. In between, it is controlled by the 7514<sup>th</sup> Support Group, then by Detachment 2/754<sup>th</sup> SG. These two organizations had their staff based in Toul-Rosières. So we can think that Chambley was a kind of satellite base for Toul based aircrafts.

Chambley is reactivated for the Berlin crisis, one of the hottest periods of the cold war. Now the wall is finally down, some specialists affirm that the 3<sup>rd</sup> WW was very close.

On November 1961, some F-84F of the 163<sup>rd</sup> TFS/ 122<sup>nd</sup> TFW from Indiana National Guard arrive in Chambley. In France, this unit becomes the 7122<sup>nd</sup> FW. This first unit is soon joined by the 106 TRW from Alabama, turned into the 7108<sup>th</sup> TRW at the heart of the USAFE and 17<sup>th</sup> Air Force. These two wings have two different missions, so two different types of aircrafts. The choice of Chambley AB to host these RF-84F is not due to random, but because of the neighbourhood of Toul AB, also specialized in tactical recce. To remind you, let's recall that Toul AB became a recce base on October 1960, with the arrival of RF-101C Voodoo from Phalsbourg with the 32<sup>nd</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> TRS stationed in TRAB respectively until March, and July 1962.

This massive invasion of the National Guard resuscitates Chambley. It was not too early, because the base already showed some aging signs, due to the lack of maintenance.

The National Guard does not carry on the nuclear role, having a more conventional mission: to stop an eventual invasion of RFA by countries of the Warsaw Pact.

When Guardsmen went to France, the general opinion about our country had not evolved much: a note given to the future Chambley inhabitants told: *“Chambley inhabitants: 500 people. Family's houses in the base surroundings are low under US standards: no central heating, WC often located in the court. Some houses have a home part on the second floor, the first floor often being occupied by a cattle shed. Houses of stones or bricks are hard to warm. The furnished houses are reduced to the minimum, and furniture itself is often very old. It is better not to buy neither vegetables nor dairy products on the market: these products do not have the American sanitary requirements for food products. The water is not purified, so prefer the bottles of water...”*

About the life on base itself: *“Most of the trailers are rent for a three year period. They are tiny, ten years old, so do not compare them to those you can find on bases in the US. Anyway, in Chambley AB you can find a little store, a movie theatre, a snack bar, a bowling alley an officer's restaurant and another for soldiers. The medical skills are limited: the closest hospital is in Toul-Rosières. A nursery school exists on base, but elementary school is in Toul, and high school is in Verdun; buses services ensured.”*

Even all this folklore, most of Americans that lived in Chambley at this time said they appreciated their tour. Well, sure the place was not the best of the military structure, but the tourism aspect in Europe let the strongest impression.

On July 1962, the guardsmen and their families left the base. Once more, the F-84F stay at the base, while the men of the 163<sup>rd</sup> TFS come back to Indiana. The Alabama unit takes its RF-84F back to the US. Letting the *Thunderstreak* in France was part of the operation that planned creation of a new unit: the 366<sup>th</sup> TFW thought to gather all the F-84F let on the bases by the ANG wings. So Chambley turns under control of 7367<sup>th</sup> Combat Support Group which itself controls the 366<sup>th</sup> TFW and as a consequence, the 390<sup>th</sup> TFS flying *Thunderstreak* from Chambley. The ANG markings are removed from the aircrafts and a new badge is painted on the top of the tail.

One year later, on July 1963 estimating that situation in Europe became normal again; USAF assigned 366<sup>th</sup> TFS to the TAC. The commanding badge painted on the tail, the aircrafts via Prestwick, flew back to the USA, with people and materials.

Once in America, this wing remained the last unit flying the F-84F. For a short time, as the F-4 transformation and the Vietnam would soon follow.

### 1963-1965

The Americans having left with their aircrafts, another sleeping time arrived for Chambley. The base lives folded on it, with very few exterior contacts, and reduced manpower. Some aircrafts from Toul still make some touch and go, but it is no *Voodoo* any longer, as they have been transferred to Laon, but enormous RB-66. The base turned into DOB once again. It only hosts some MATS aircrafts during the “Big Lift” operation in 1963, when a lot of soldiers were transferred to Europe to take part to exercises in RFA. Until July 1965, the base stays calm.

### 1965-1967

Chambley is about to resuscitate once again, thanks to a USAF reform, and thanks to TRAB. Waiting indeed for new RF-4C in Europe, a new wing is created in Toul, the 26<sup>th</sup> TRW, to receive the new aircrafts. So place was needed to accommodate the new fighters, but the *Destroyer* were still needed before the 26<sup>th</sup> was fully operational. On July, 1<sup>st</sup> 1965, the 25<sup>th</sup> Tactical Reconnaissance Group is created in Chambley. As a result, the 42<sup>nd</sup> TRS and its E/RB-66 specialized in electronic recce move to Chambley AB. This squadron was followed on October 1<sup>st</sup> 1965 by the 19<sup>th</sup> TRS also equipped with *Destroyer*, which official mission is night recce. At the same time, the term “Group” is turned into “Wing”. Let’s recall that at this time, Etain, Chaumont, Dreux and Phalsbourg had lost their operational base status for a long time.

At the same time, Chambley hosts a detachment GAF, equipped with HH-43B *Husky*, a highly specialized helicopter. This aircraft allowed a rescuing team to come as close as possible of a crashed plane to save the crew. The unit arrives in Chambley in January 1966 under the name “Detachment 12” Atlantic Aerospace Rescue & Recover Centre equipped with 2 helicopters.

This small unit’s staff was located in Ramstein, under MATS control.

Colonel Max Trainer detachment Co, told me that during his short stay in Chambley, no crash did happen with the RB/66. Their activity was not high, as many units had already joined USA, preparing their journey in Thailand, for the Vietnam War, with the EB-66, electronic war version of the *Destroyer*. Colonel Trainer also reminds that *“life on base was quite austere. We lived by ourselves, and made a lot of social activities. I lived with my family in Metz in a brand-new quarter we shared with French Relationships were excellent, even by the time; a kind of resentment was noticeable for the Americans. By the way, one day De Gaulle was visiting Verdun, we were all consigned on the base, with no authorization to get out of it.”*

In the middle of September 1966, due to close final disengagement, the RB-66 flies back to the USA. The Vietnam War was waiting for them. As a consequence, the *Husky* detachment was useless on a aircraft-emptied base. So it moves in September too, to its new base, Woodbridge, Great Britain. During this flight, the *Husky* n°24521 flew by Max Trainer cross the Channel by a non-stop flight from Chambley.

Soon, the end arrives. The base is evacuated little by little, first by families, then by administration. Electronic and electrical skills are dismantled, hangers and control tower closed. All the material that could still be useful was sent to Germany, on others USAFE bases. One month later, Chambley AB is deserted, after 13 years living among the USAF, in

which 8 were spent under operational occupancy. Today remains that phantom aspect. This cold war vestige was never re-activated.