

LUKE AFB AND THE THUNDERBIRDS

In 1953 Luke's mission was Combat Crew Training! The war in Korea was in full swing and Luke's mission was providing combat ready F-84 pilots for duty in Korea.

My first job at Luke for a few months was Chief of Training Analysis and Development (TA&D). My friend from Willy, Nellis and Alaska, Bob Evans was in TA&D with me. Colonel Maurice Martin Commander of the Fighter Weapons School at Williams and Nellis was now the Training Group Commander at Luke. Luke was and still is the largest Wing in the Air Force with approximately 250 aircraft assigned. A normal Wing has 75 aircraft. Martin's Group Operations Officer was Lt. Colonel Dewey Bowers, and he was on orders to go to Japan to become Commander of the 9th Fighter Squadron at Nagoya. (We exchanged jobs several times) When Bowers left, Colonel Martin gave me the job of Group Operations Officer, a Lt. Colonels job. Group Operations was the nerve center for the entire Luke Operation and I had a staff of only four officers. Suffice it to say we all worked very hard and long hours to keep up with course changes and day to day scheduling. The Syllabus of instruction for all the courses changed frequently and it was our job to re-write the Syllabus. This was always night work because there was no time during normal duty hours. It was not uncommon to work an eighteen-hour day, but it was an interesting and challenging job!

I think this incident occurred while Colonel Martin was still our Group Commander. CTAF Headquarters (may have come from Training Command Hq.) sent us a directive telling us to eliminate all air-to-air gunnery training in the courses at Luke. Nellis AFB, with their F-86F's was to specialize in air-to-air and Luke would train pilots only in air-to-ground gunnery. I disagreed with this philosophy violently. I talked our commander into not implementing the directive until I could prepare a "Staff Study" to justify the continuation of air-to air gunnery for pilots at Luke. (Fresh out of AC&SS I was a Staff Study expert). I made the argument that in combat a pilot delivering ordnance on a ground target might at any moment have to fight for his survival in the air-to-air mode. We had many Korean returnees instructing at Luke and I collected depositions from P-51, P-80 and F-84 pilots who had been attacked by Migs while on an air-to-ground mission in Korea. Their depositions became part of the Staff Study. We submitted the study to CTAF with the conclusion that it was ill advised and wrong to eliminate training in air-to-air combat. The directive to cancel air-to-air training was rescinded.

Colonel Martin was soon transferred to Korea as Commander of a Fighter Wing. About the same time our Wing Commander, Colonel Tom Moseley, was transferred to Laughlin AfB, Del Rio, Texas to open the base for student training. The most capable officer in my office, Captain Jack Broughton went to Del Rio with Moseley as the Group Operations Officer for the new training group. Our new Wing Commander was Brigadier General Charley Born, a very large man with a big voice. At our first briefing, in a large open area near the flight line, Born told us he didn't need a microphone, and that people called him "Muzzleblast". He was a great Commander who knew how to get things moving and keep them moving. He was what I term a real "Operator"! Colonel Martin's replacement and my immediate boss was Colonel Levi Chase, who had just completed a tour in Korea as the Commander of a Fighter Wing. I soon found that his personality and philosophy about training pilots was exactly 180 degrees opposite that of my previous boss, Maurice Martin. Colonel Martin's philosophy about training pilots for combat was to give them the most realistic training possible and not worry about the accidents.

Luke at that time had the worst accident rate of any Fighter Wing in the Air Force. Colonel Martin's philosophy about combat crew training was, "It's cheaper to kill a pilot in training than in combat". As I recall (may not be correct), one month we averaged one major accident a day. CTAF Headquarters sent us a directive stipulating that pilots on low level navigational training flights would maintain a minimum altitude of 500 feet. One student came back with a piece of cactus stuck in the wing and Headquarters wanted him eliminated from training. Colonel Martin was defiant and told his boss that he himself had authorized students to ignore the 500 feet minimum. It was about a month later that he received orders to Korea.

General Born, our new Wing Commander, inadvertently got me in hot water with my new boss, Colonel Levi Chase. Born was a real operator and soon learned that the nerve center for the Luke operation was Group Operations. Almost daily he came to my office to find out "how things were going". He would always ask if we had any problems, and I soon learned not to exaggerate, or blow smoke. When I identified a problem he wanted action and immediately picked up my phone and started chewing on whoever was on the other end of the line. At times the person was a two or three star General at a higher headquarters. Born always got action! The fact that Born always came to me (A Major) to find out what was going on, and not to the Group Commander, began to irritate Levi Chase, and I can understand that. I just didn't realize there was a problem until one-day Born asked me about something and Chase interrupted and told him that he would give him the answer, but turned on his heel and stomped out of the room. Born got the message and I didn't see as much of him after that. The real problem was that I had the answers to Born's questions and Chase didn't. Colonel Chase had never been in a training environment.

Another incident occurred soon after Born and Chase arrived at Luke that I'm sure didn't endear me to my new boss. Metal fatigue was found in the wing spar of some of our F-84s and the word was that all F-84s would be restricted to 4 Gs until they had been to a depot for a fix. I had heard that we might close down operations completely because the training program couldn't live with a 4-G restriction. No one asked me for an opinion, so I gave none! One morning I was in my flight suit in one of the squadrons briefing for a gunnery mission with students. Someone came in and advised me that I was to be in General Born's office for a meeting at 8:00 AM. It was now about five minutes before 8:00. I was really ticked off for several reasons. First, it was five minutes before 8:00 and I should have been notified earlier. Second, I was scheduled for a flight and would have to cancel my flight, disrupting my schedule and the squadrons. Third, I was in my flight suit and would have to go back to my office to change to a uniform. While I didn't dally going back to the office to change I didn't rush either.

I walked into the conference room at Wing Headquarters about 8:15. There were 15-20 officers seated around the conference table, mostly Colonels and Lt. Colonels. As I walked through the door General Born looked at the clock on the wall and said to me in a very gruff voice, "Can't you fighter pilots get anywhere on time"! That really ticked me off, but I didn't offer a word of explanation and took the only chair available at the very end of the table facing Born who was at the head of the table. After about 5 Minutes General Born looked at me and said with a grin, "Stop glaring at me Major, you'll find that my bark is much worse than my bite". That helped a little and I tried not to glare!

The meeting was to discuss the wing problem with the F-84 and to decide whether we could continue to operate or not with the 4-G restriction on the aircraft. Born went around the table asking all the Colonels for their opinion. Everyone told Born it would be impossible to conduct the training with the restriction, including my boss Colonel Chase. Finally Born asked me for an opinion! I told him that we could continue to operate with the restriction, and explained that a pilot should not have to pull more than 4-G's on any of the passes delivering ordnance on the air-to-ground gunnery ranges. I told him that if the instructors emphasized the importance of delivering ordnance at the correct dive angle, airspeed, and release altitude, then the pilot would not exceed 4 G's on the recovery. The only gunnery event that a pilot might exceed 4-G's would be in air-to-air gunnery, and that would be when he made an error in judgment in the gunnery pattern and pulled excessive G's to get the gunsight pipper on the air target. Again, if the instructor emphasized the importance of breaking off the pass before exceeding the 4-G's we shouldn't have a problem. Additionally, the air-to-air gunnery was conducted at high altitude and if the pilot exceeded the 4-G's the result wouldn't be as severe. I concluded that in my opinion we could continue the training program with the 4-G restriction. General Born was obviously elated because prior to my explanation he had been convinced that Luke would have to cease operations. He made the decision then and there that we would continue to operate with the restriction! We continued operating and had no problem with the 4-G restriction.

In retrospect I'm sure Colonel Chase felt he had "lost face" and was very chagrined about the whole thing. I would be had the situation been reversed. However, Chase had never talked to me about the problem and I didn't know what the meeting was about until I walked into the room. Still, it didn't make him look very good after he told Born we couldn't continue flying with the restriction, and I said we could.

There was one more "incident", and this one was my undoing! In a fighter wing in combat the Wing Commander, and most of the pilots in the wing have their "own aircraft" with their name on the nose or somewhere. When they fly combat missions they usually fly the same aircraft on every mission, when possible. In a training environment it would be impossible for instructors, or students to fly the same aircraft on every mission. Desirable, but impossible for many reasons! Colonel Chase told me to pick out an aircraft, have it painted with distinguished markings and have it parked on the ramp in front of Group Headquarters. That would be his aircraft and no one else would fly it. I disagreed with this for several reasons, and explained to him why it wasn't a good idea. The end result was that I would "Do it"! We were extremely short of aircraft to the degree we flew students and instructors *every* Saturday and often Sundays to get the flying hours required for every student to graduate. I also believed that if maintenance personnel knew that the Group Commander might be flying any one of their aircraft at any time, it might be an incentive to improve maintenance. I *really* didn't want to come up with a color scheme for Chase's aircraft and have it set on the ramp most of the time. So, I drug my feet!

When Chase asked me about the status of "his aircraft", I'd reply that I was working on it. A couple of weeks went by and I was always "working on it". It finally came to a head one day. Chase had a weekly meeting of his staff and all his squadron commanders. On this day we were all waiting in his outer office, about fifteen of us, when Chase came in the front door and walked through the crowd to his office. When he reached the door of his office he turned around and said in a loud voice (I'm in the back of the room), "Dick, what have you done about painting my airplane"? I felt he was deliberately trying to embarrass me, and his manner and tone rubbed me

the wrong way. In the same tone he used I said “Nothing”! I didn’t use Sir, or Colonel—just Nothing! He said, “I’d like to see you in my office before the meeting”. He was relatively nice, but he fired me then and there! This was a first for me, but I really didn’t mind because we had a personality conflict from the start and it was difficult working so close with him. He told me the obvious, that we didn’t work well together, and that he needed someone he could work with and was going to replace me! He said he would make me Squadron Commander of one of the training squadrons, and I accepted, reluctantly.

Colonel Chase was difficult to like! But, in all fairness to him, I deserved to be fired! I was insubordinate to say the least, and had not been responsive to his requests. When an accident occurred in any phase of training Colonel Chase told me to “eliminate that phase of training until I can get a handle on it”. Of course he didn’t have the authority to eliminate any phase of training, but we did, for short periods of time. After a few days or a week he always reinstated that particular phase, with no changes. I suspect that the act of eliminating the phase got everyone’s attention. He was a man of few words. I can’t recall ever seeing him smile or casually talk with the troops. Being “fired” by him didn’t really bother me. I figured it would result in a bad OER, but that’s life!

As a Squadron Commander I saw Chase once a week at the staff meetings, and only spoke to him when spoken to. My squadron did very well and usually took honors each month for flying hours accomplished, and no accidents.

In the early part of May 1953 Luke received a directive through channels from Air Force Headquarters to form an Air Force Air Demonstration Team. The Team was to be commanded by a Major and would be authorized five pilots, five F-84 Gs, a maintenance officer with the appropriate number of maintenance personnel, and a narrator/public relations officer. All members of the team, and the aircraft were to be dedicated to the mission of Air Demonstration, and would be scheduled by the Pentagon for air demonstrations worldwide. General Born gave Colonel Chase the responsibility of organizing the team. Luke couldn’t afford to dedicate the resources, but was directed to form the team because Air Force wanted the team to demonstrate the capabilities of a front line fighter and the F-84 was the workhorse for the Air Force in Korea. Everyone on the base knew about the directive to form an Air Force Demonstration Team, and that it was to be headed by a Major. The directive had been on the base for at least two weeks, and I knew that almost every flying Major on the base, except me, had gone in to Chase and volunteered for the job of organizing and leading the team. No one had been selected and I’m sure time was growing short to get the team started. My Operations Officer, Major Cliff Gould, knew I was at odds with Chase and had not yet volunteered for the job. Finally Gould came to me and asked me to go to Colonel Chase and recommend him for the job. I was happy to do that for Gould, and knew he would do a good job. I went to Chase’s office (my first voluntary visit), stood in front of his desk and made a strong pitch highly recommending Major Gould for the job of organizing the team. After I finished building Gould up for the job there was a silence for about a minute. Finally Colonel Chase looked at me and said, “How about you”! I was really in shock! It sounded as if he was offering me the job! I said Colonel if you’re offering me the job I’ll take it. He told me I didn’t have to make a decision right then, that I could talk it over with my wife and give him my decision the next day. I told him that I didn’t need to do that, and if he was offering me the job I’d like to have it! To this day I have no idea why he gave me the job! Had I not gone into his office to recommend Gould I suspect that someone else would have

organized the Thunderbirds. After going back to the squadron I explained to Cliff Gould my verbatim conversation with Chase. I felt bad for Gould because I had gone in to volunteer him for the job and came out of Chase's office with the job myself.

Before leaving Colonel Chase's office he told me that as far as the base was concerned I had a blank check! I was to select the pilots and maintenance personnel and aircraft and find a place to live. He said that if I ran into any problems to come back and see him and he'd help. I never went back! As I was walking out the door of his office he said, "By the way, your first show is in three weeks".

Fortunately Buck and Bill Pattillo, identical twins, had flown with the Skyblazer air demonstration team in Europe, and were now instructors at Luke. Because of their experience they were my first choice for pilots. I contacted Buck and Bill and briefed them on the mission of forming a dedicated air demonstration team. They both volunteered. They had flown left and right wing with the Skyblazers and without the experience of Buck and Bill we could never have been ready for the first show in three weeks. My next pilot choice was Captain Bob Kanaga, an instructor in my squadron and an officer I had known and respected for many years. Kanaga was one of my P-51 students at Williams years before, and when he graduated we kept him at Willy as an instructor. We kept only the best officers and pilots. Kanaga had asked me to put in a word for him when he knew I was going to see Chase to recommend Gould for the job, so I knew he wanted to be part of the team. I chose Kanaga for the "slot" position and knew he would do an outstanding job. I now had the other three pilots to fly the "diamond" formation. Buck and Bill on the wings, and Kanaga in the slot. Buck and Bill recommended Lt. A.D. Brown, an F-84 instructor, for the maintenance officer's job and Brownie accepted the job. We were authorized a fifth pilot, and we had five aircraft, so the fifth pilot became a "spare", and flew the spare aircraft to all the show sites with us. When I was the Group Operations officer I often flew with one of the squadrons on gunnery training missions. I always sat in on the briefing the instructor gave to his students, and filled in as # 4 man in the 4 ship flight. I always used this technique to evaluate the instructor, and to see how well he knew his job and how well he performed in the air.. On one mission Lt. Robert McCormick was the instructor. McCormick was a Korean returnee and some returnees had a bad reputation for being wild. I was impressed with McCormicks knowledge, his thoroughness in briefing students, and his air discipline on the gunnery range. When I was looking for a spare pilot I thought of McCormick, now a Captain, When I approached him about the job he eagerly accepted. The last officer I selected was Captain Bill Brock for the narrator and public relations position. Brock was a pilot but had been grounded permanently for medical reasons resulting from an aircraft accident. Brock's job at the time was Chief of the Academics Department.

I wanted the place for the team to live to be near the flight line. The only building that qualified was the Base Operations facility. I talked to the Base Operations officer and told him how much space I needed. A large room in Base Ops was made available and it became our home at Luke. For the aircraft I wanted a distinctive paint job. On day one and before selecting any pilots I knew I wanted a red, white and blue color scheme with blue stars on a white background on the vertical stabilizer (Tail). Some months before I had seen an F-86F parked in our transient alert area with the tail painted white with blue stars. It was an impressive paint job. On one of our first pilot meetings, if not the first, we kicked around how to paint the aircraft. We came to no conclusion and I gave McCormick the task of putting the ideas on a small model F-

84. Mac took the model home and came back the next day with the red, white and blue scallops on the nose, fuel tip-tanks, and the tail with blue stars on the vertical stabilizer. We liked the paint job, but thought the scallops flowed too much. McCormick took another model home and came back the next day with the color scheme we adopted. and gave Brownie the job of getting the aircraft painted ASAP.

We decided to let the base help us select a name for the team, and Brock ran a contest in the base newspaper. The winner of the contest would receive a savings bond of \$50 or \$100, and an all expense paid weekend at Las Vegas. We received approximately 100 entries, and about 25% of the names submitted were the name Thunderbirds. Thunderbirds was a very common name in the Phoenix area. In fact it was such a common name we discarded it immediately. Selecting a name is difficult! We weren't enamored with any of the names submitted, but finally chose "Stardusters".

From day one we began practicing low level formation flying. Buck and Bill were highly experienced in this business and they in fact trained me. It was important that we develop confidence in each other. I had to build their confidence in me as a leader for they literally placed their lives in my hands. I took the pilots up one at a time so that we could develop confidence in each other. I had to demonstrate that I was a good, responsible leader, and they had to demonstrate the ability to maintain a good position at all times. We were assigned a practice area at an abandoned airstrip about thirty miles northwest of Luke and we flew two or three training missions daily. Before long we were doing our routine in a four-ship diamond formation, and we were in business. During this period I gave Colonel Chase progress reports, but never asked for his help, advice, or approval. There was no one looking over my shoulder. I was given the job and the authority to do it! It was a great job! A.D. Brown and his maintenance people did a superb job to get the aircraft ready in three weeks. Flying the aircraft 2 or 3 times daily didn't deter their maintenance effort.

I never thought about it before, but we all had to do a good job in order to have the Team ready in three weeks. We weren't harried, or rushed, everything just fell into place.

Initially we wore the standard Air force olive drab uniform. The Republic Aviation Company manufactured the F-84 and was eager to do something for the Air Force demonstration team that was flying their aircraft. We asked Republic to have some distinctive uniforms made for us. They tried, but the uniforms they had made were a terrible shade of blue and didn't fit. My little wife Norma solved our problem for us. She suggested we dye the Air Force flying suit black. We gave her all the flying suits and she put them in a washing machine and dyed them black. Those were the flying suits the Thunderbirds wore for several years.

Our first official show was across town at Williams AFB. The Chief of Staff of the Air Force, General Hoyt S.Vandenberg was at Willy for his son's graduation from flying school. I assume the Chief had requested the Air Force team be scheduled for this event and that was why I had "three weeks to the first show". We were ready! We did the show as scheduled, with our newly painted red, white and blue aircraft, and I think we made the Chief proud. I'm not sure how the people at Williams felt about us because when the Thunderbirds were formed as an Air Force team, all other acrobatic teams were ordered to cease operations. Williams was home to the Acrojets, the very first jet acrobatic team. I was stationed at Willy in 1946 when the Acrojets

were formed in the P-80 squadron. Although I was in the P-51 squadron, the pilots in the P-80 outfit were good friends. When the Acrojets started the leader was Captain Swede Jensen, the wingmen were Captain Pierre Yeargin, and Lt. Mike Smolen. The slot pilot was Lefty Sellinger, my next door neighbor. The Acrojets as well as all other acrobatic teams, including the Skyblazers in Europe, performed air demonstrations as an additional duty. The pilots and aircraft were assigned to regular squadrons and did their air demonstrations on weekends as extra duty. Since Willy had a well-established air demonstration team I assume they didn't get the Air Force mission because they were flying the P-80, a training aircraft. Doing the first show at Willy was like "rubbing their nose in it", and I thought there might be some sour grapes and ill feelings toward us, but everyone at Willy was very gracious and complimentary.

We had been in business about a month as the Stardusters when the commanding General of our Command, General Bob Harper sent a message. His message said that he thought the team should be called the "Thunderbirds" because we were in the Phoenix area and the Thunderbird was symbolic of the area. We changed the name! However, Brock our Public Information Officer and Narrator, had sent advance (3 to 4 weeks) brochures to cities where we would be performing at a future date. The newspapers at these cities gave us a write up in their papers, as the Stardusters because that was the name in the obsolete brochure. Evidently General Harper was given the word that we had not changed the name of the team and I received another message from him telling me the first message was not a request, but an order. I assured him that the name had been changed and explained about the advance brochures, and that was the end of it.

The routine for our demonstration was tailored after the routine Buck and Bill used when flying with the Skyblazers in Europe. I didn't permit the spare pilot to perform a solo routine. My thought was to demonstrate to the public precision formation flying. I was also concerned that a solo pilot might try to "steal the show" and do something daring and dangerous to impress the audience and have an accident. Obviously I wouldn't have the control of a solo pilot as I did with the pilots in a four-ship diamond. We stayed in a four-ship diamond for the entire demonstration except for the opening maneuver, and the final maneuver. Opening the show we entered from behind the audience, at low level, in a trail formation. This always surprised and startled the crowd! We then pulled straight up and everyone moved into their diamond position as we ascended vertically in front of the crowd. At the top of the maneuver we rolled to the left and came down lined up with the runway. From there we worked the formation up and down the runway, never releasing back pressure and maintaining four G's at all times. The turn arounds at the end of the runway we called a Whifferdill, and were probably the most demanding maneuvers of the routine. After bottoming out of a loop, or a roll, we made a 30 degree turn to the right going vertical with a constant four G pressure. Reaching vertical we then rolled to the left and over the top and diving down lined up with the runway and started our next maneuver. The diamond was never out of sight of the audience including the execution of the Whifferdill.

The final maneuver was the "Bomb burst". We initiated this by coming in low, perpendicular to the runway and straight at the audience, pulling to the vertical directly over the runway. When exactly vertical I called "Break now", and the pilots went in four different directions simultaneously. The wingmen went toward opposite ends of the runway, the slot pilot did a half roll and went in back of the audience and I continued back in the direction of our entry. We all rolled out level at 5,000 ft above the terrain going away from each other. At the proper

time I called “Split-S now”, and we all did a half roll diving toward the ground and now heading directly toward each other at 450 mph. Our hope was to meet at the cross over point at exactly the same time, directly in front of the audience. Sometimes we were precise, and sometimes someone would be a split second late or early, but it always looked close to the audience. After the cross over we’re now going in opposite directions again, and our objective was to join up in the diamond as rapidly as possible out it front of the audience. To do this the slot pilot and I had to do an over the top maneuver with the slot pilot moving into his position on the downside of the loop as I’m diving toward the ground, and the wingmen joining as I bottom out going away from the crowd.

As Commander/Leader of the team I had no instructions, guidance, or directives from anyone, anywhere. I was completely responsible and had no one looking over my shoulder, or telling me what I could or couldn’t do. It was a great job in that respect! After we had been in operation for several months, with no accidents, or near misses, I heard via the grapevine, that General Harper’s Vice Commander, Major General Glenn Barcus was going to develop a Command regulation governing the team. That was OK, but one of the rules he wanted in the regulation was that we would not go below 500 feet during a demonstration. That wasn’t OK! The meeting to develop this regulation was to take place after an air demonstration that was scheduled at Scott AFB, our Command Headquarters. After the demonstration I was to meet with staff officers from the Pentagon, and our Headquarters. I had previously made my position clear to the staff officers that I couldn’t agree to the 500 feet restriction. We completed the show at Scott, and General Barcus was the first to meet me after landing congratulating me on the great performance of the team. I pointedly asked the General if he thought we came too low during the demonstration. He nudged me with his elbow and said, “Naw, you weren’t too low, you weren’t under 500 feet”, and gave a big laugh. The proposed restriction was typical of a Headquarters trying to cover their 6 O’clock. In the event we had an accident they could say, we have a regulation restricting the team to a 500-foot minimum altitude, and Catledge violated the regulation. However, they really didn’t want me to observe the restriction!

I went to the meeting and during the discussion of the 500-foot minimum I related my conversation with General Barcus. I gave them my opinion of why Barcus wanted the minimum in the regulation. I told them that if the regulation were published establishing the 500-foot minimum the team would have to find another leader, that I wasn’t going to have my head in the cockpit watching the altimeter to make sure I didn’t violate the regulation. Evidently my argument prevailed because the published regulation didn’t call for a minimum altitude. No one could be more interested in *not* running into the ground than me!

Our Wing Commander, General Born requested that I call him after every performance to let him know how things were going. I always called him and gave him a short run down on the show, the crowd, etc. Colonel Chase never requested that I report to him after a show and so I didn’t. When we returned to Luke after one or more demonstrations away from home I always went to his office and gave him a verbal report of the team’s activities. At one of these meetings, after we had been in operation for 2 or 3 months, Colonel Chase vented his feelings. He was really upset, and I could understand why. Our team was under him and he was responsible for the team, yet he had no control, or voice, in what we did, where we did it, or when we did it. He really knew nothing about the team except for my briefing him after the fact. He repeated several times that organizationally it just wasn’t right. After venting his feelings for several minutes, and

he was really on the ceiling at times, he told me that he wasn't blaming me, that he just didn't like being given the responsibility but no authority. There wasn't anything I could do to solve his problem. He was correct though, he did have the responsibility and responsibility can never be delegated! It really wasn't fair to him, but we were *the Air Force Team* and organizationally had to be under someone. Knowing how he felt, and remembering my association with him as his Group Operations Officer, I was a little concerned that I might be fired again, although that was pretty unlikely. I'm sure Chase had never talked to his boss, General Born, about his dilemma, so I very tactfully mentioned to General Born the discomfort Chase had about having the responsibility of the team but no authority, and that it wasn't very fair to him. A few days later I received orders placing the team directly under the Wing Commander, General Born, thus taking Colonel Chase completely out of the chain of command for the team. I was much more comfortable, and it eliminated an unnecessary element of command.

Sometime in the fall of 1953 the Air Force Association nominated the Thunderbirds as the most outstanding unit in the Air Force. That year the annual National Air Force Association Convention was held in Omaha, Nebraska. The Thunderbirds were invited as honored guests and the Pentagon scheduled us for several air demonstrations during the convention. One evening there was a huge reception at the home (A large estate) of one of the city leaders. Evidently his home had been built when Omaha was a small city for now his estate of several acres was on a six lane boulevard and almost in the middle of downtown Omaha. Motorcycle policemen escorted many of the guests to the function. There were two white police motorcycles parked at the curb in front of the home. I was dressed in coat and tie, with a mixed drink in my hand when one of Thunderbird pilots came racing into the back yard to find me. He knew that I rode motorcycles in my youth and he had been negotiating with one of the policemen at the curb for me to ride his motorcycle. He told me that, Joe, one of the policemen had agreed to let me ride his motorcycle if I would give him a ride in our T-33 the next day. I couldn't believe it but I went around to the front to talk with Joe and see if he really would let me ride his motorcycle. He said that he understood that I had ridden motorcycles a lot and that I could ride his right then if I would give him a ride in the T-33. I assured him I was proficient on a motorcycle and promised him a ride in our T-33.

What an exciting, memorable, motorcycle ride! Joe told me to take his partner's motorcycle and we'd go for a ride. McCormick got on behind Joe, and my old P-38 instructor at Muroc, Don Perry now a Lt. Colonel, got on behind me. A really brave thing to do! However, Joe got off his motorcycle and came over to me and told me he would rather not have anyone ride with me, so Perry got off. While Joe was getting back on his motorcycle I had an impulse to go! I cleared for traffic and burned rubber leaving the curb. I then slowed down to let Joe catch up and was a little concerned that he might be upset with me for speeding off without him. When he caught me he was smiling so all was well. As we were riding side by side down this six-lane boulevard I asked Joe if I could turn on the red light. He said sure and told me where to find the switch. I then asked him if I could activate the siren. He said I could and told me where to find the control for the siren. This six-lane boulevard had heavy traffic and many red stop lights. When I turned on the siren, with red lights going, the effect was magic. The traffic cleared ahead of me and I picked up speed. We were flying along at 60 mph and not slowing for red lights. Finally I began to get a little nervous about Joe getting into real trouble for letting me do this. I had on a civilian coat and tie and the passenger behind Joe had on a coat and tie, and our ties were streaming in the wind and coats were flying open. I began to wonder what all the drivers of the cars we were

passing thought about the spectacle we presented. I decided to turn off the boulevard and take a back street on the way home. We made it back without incident. I made arrangements to meet Joe the next morning for his T-33 ride.

After the reception was over several of us had no transportation to our hotel in downtown Omaha, and were standing on the sidewalk looking for a taxi, and talking to Joe and his partner who were still there. I told Joe we were looking for a taxi for transportation, and he said just a minute I'll get you transportation. Traffic going toward town was on the other side of the street so Joe crossed over and stopped a big Model T touring car with several college kids in it. He pulled it over to the curb and made everyone except the driver get out. He then motioned for us to come over. We did, and about six of us crammed into the car. The driver looked a little scared and obviously was startled. After we were in the car Joe had the driver wait while he got his motorcycle and he then escorted us to our hotel. Joe escorted us the wrong way down a one way street near the hotel. I'm sure he did it deliberately because it was a short cut to the hotel. He was in front of the Model T with red lights and siren going. It was a narrow one way street and cars had to get on the sidewalk to give us clearance. Joe should have been a fighter pilot!

The next day I was at the airfield to give Joe his T-33 ride, but he was a no show. I waited a couple of hours and finally gave up. We saw him later in the day and he apologized for not showing up for the ride and explained he was called suddenly to escort a parade. We had to leave the next day and were never able to get Joe in the T-33.

The Pentagon and the State Department was planning to send jets on a tour through South America. The primary purpose of the tour was to demonstrate American jet fighter aircraft and try to sell jets to some of the South American countries. The tour was planned for January 1954. This would be the first time jet fighters were seen in South America. The plan was to include the Thunderbirds with five F-84's, five F-86F's, two F-80's, and three T-33's, for a total of fifteen jet fighters. The Thunderbirds would perform their normal air demonstration, and the other ten jets were for static display in the countries to be visited. The itinerary for the tour was to proceed from Kelly AFB, Texas to Mexico City---to Managua, Nicaragua---to Panama City, Canal Zone---to Lima, Peru---to Santiago, Chile---to Buenos Aires, Argentina---to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil---to Montevideo, Uruguay---to Recife, Brazil---to Belem, Brazil---to Georgetown, British Guyana---to Dominican Republic---to Caracas, Venezuela and the last place, Havana, Cuba. Logistics for the jet fighters, and all of the support aircraft was a monumental problem, and much of the logistical support had to be prepositioned. I was informed of the proposed tour and was looking forward to performing our air demonstration in all those countries. The nickname for the tour was "Will Tour".

In preparation for the tour the Pentagon tasked the F-86F Wing Commander from George AFB, California, a full Colonel, to make a trip to all the countries on the itinerary to determine the feasibility of the Thunderbirds performing their demonstration at all of the locations. The Colonel was assigned a C-54 aircraft for his trip though South America. I knew nothing of the Colonel's trip until after he returned and reported to the Pentagon that it would be impossible for the Thunderbirds to perform at many of the locations because of short runways, and mountains too close to the airfields. The staff at the Pentagon was very disappointed because it appeared the tour would have to be canceled. Someone on the planning staff at the Pentagon called me and told me that the trip would have to be canceled because of the negative report from the colonel. I

was asked to make a trip to South America and take a look at the locations the Colonel had declared “impossible”, but if I did I would have to go by commercial air. I agreed to go take a look at the locations, and report on the feasibility of performing at these locations. I made the trip, visited all of the locations and reported back that there would be no problem for the Thunderbirds to perform at all the locations the Colonel had deemed impossible. The Defense Department and the State Department were delighted and planning went full speed ahead.

The Colonel from George AFB was originally tasked to be the Commander of the “Will Tour” force, but was relieved of that duty, and since I was the senior Major I was put in charge of the Will Tour group. The task force of five F-84’s, five F-86F’s, three T-33’s, and two F-80’s met at Kelly AFB to begin the tour. Our first destination was Mexico City. Prior to departure I briefed the entire group on our route etc. Chuck Yeager, the first pilot to exceed the speed of sound, was just recovering from a traumatic experience in the X-1A and desiring a rest from his experimental test flying had requested permission to go on the Will Tour trip with us and his request was granted. Chuck was a Major and flew one of the T-33’s. Since the different types of jets cruised at different speeds we made the trip to Mexico City in three separate flights. The Thunderbirds were one flight, the F-86F’s flew together as a flight and the T-33’s and F-80’s flew together as a flight. After my group briefing the flights were clear to take-off at their discretion. Yeager was the leader of his flight of 3 T-33’s and two F-80’s, and after our meeting broke up Chuck said to the pilots in his group, “OK let’s go”. One of the T-33 pilots was Major Charles Chennault from the Training Command and was accustomed to an hour of briefing before every flight. Chennault said to Yeager, “wait a minute, shouldn’t we have a briefing”. Yeager looked at him and said, “Oh yeah, I tell you what, the first one to the end of the runway is the leader, and with that off he went. I could tell it was going to be an interesting trip.

As I mentioned, when we started the trip the program was for the Thunderbirds to put on an aerial demonstration in each country and the other aircraft were along for static display. However, the program changed a little as we proceeded from country to country. In Mexico City, our first demonstration stop, Major Charlie Bowers, leader of the F-86F’s asked me if one of his pilots could open the show with an F-86 doing a “Sonic Boom”. I thought that was a great idea and we made it a part of the show in every country. The five F-86 pilots took turns doing the sonic boom opening. At the next stop Yeager asked me if he could do a “maximum performance” take-off in his T-33 before the Thunderbird demonstration started and I told him he could, and that became part of our show. I thought it would be difficult to impress anyone with a “maximum performance” take off in a T-33, but Yeager made me cringe a little every time he did it. He pulled up so steep I felt sure he would stall and crash, but he always had enough speed left to wing over and fly out of it. Later one of our support aircraft pilots, flying in a big four-engine aluminum cloud, a C-123, wanted to do a fly by, come in on the deck, pitch up and land in front of the crowd. I said OK, and he scared me to death the first time he did it. It was spectacular! He should have been a fighter pilot. We also had two twin engine amphibious aircraft with us for the entire trip for rescue operations in the event an aircraft had trouble when flying over water and the pilot bailed out. Surprisingly, we had several long over water flights when traveling to some of the countries. Toward the end of the tour the pilots of the amphibians also got into the act. For posterity---The two F-80 pilots were Major Smiley Burnett, and Captain Stash Simpson--both from Nellis AFB. Two of the T-33 pilots were Major Chuck Yeager--from Edwards AFB, and Major Chuck Chennault--from Williams AFB. I don't recall the name of the other T-33 pilot.

Mexico City is at an elevation of 7,500 feet. The high altitude and thin air wasn't a big problem for the Thunderbird demonstration, but I had to plan ahead more than normal. The newspapers reported there were one million people watching the Thunderbirds perform in Mexico City. We had advertised that the show would open with a sonic boom by the F-86. Initially we were concerned that the "boom" might break a lot of windows in the area and we would be responsible for the breakage. We didn't include the boom in the show until the President told us not to worry. He told us he would have everyone tape up their windows and if any were broken he would assume responsibility. The F-86 got a good "boom" that startled and impressed everyone. I later heard that some windows were broken, but it wasn't a big deal.

All the pilots on the tour were guests of Mexico City at a Bullfight. This was my first and I didn't think I would enjoy the Bullfight. It turned out to be the most exciting event I've ever witnessed. Some of the Matadors are unbelievably courageous! Each Matador fights several bulls during the course of the event, and spectators become "simpatico" with the Matadors. The best Matador had a "bad" bull, and was frustrated because it wasn't a good fight. They are permitted to "buy" an extra bull, and this Matador bought an extra bull. That fight was one I'll never forget. When a Matador does something especially brave the crowd of several thousand, with one voice gives an "OLE", and it cracks out like a cannon going off. This Matador got an "OLE" on every maneuver, and he deserved it. When it was over I was so excited I wanted to jump down in the bullring and shake his hand.

Departing Mexico City was a thrill. At 7,500 feet a jet requires a long take-off roll to get airborne because of the thin air that results in less thrust for a jet engine. We all *thought* the runway was long enough, but in those days a pilot didn't calculate the take-off roll, we just guessed. Today a pilot uses a formula for determining the exact distance he will roll on the runway before becoming airborne. If he hasn't attained the prescribed speed at a certain point on the take-off, the take-off is aborted. Our F-84's didn't have a take-off problem because our aircraft were equipped to use JATO (Jet Assisted Take-Off). JATO consists of a rocket motor attached to each side of the fuselage and is fired after the pilot begins the take-off roll. The use of JATO decreases the take-off roll considerably. The expended rocket motors are jettisoned in a prescribed drop area. The F-86 pilots had a bit of a problem because for sufficient range they had four external fuel tanks installed under the wings. This makes for a heavily loaded aircraft, especially for a take-off at 7,500 feet of elevation.

The F-86 pilots departed first. We were sitting in the cockpit on the ramp watching the F-86 group going on the runway for take-off. We knew it was going to be close and they would undoubtedly use every inch of the runway. Major Bowers released brakes and started down the runway with three aircraft for a formation take-off. About 20 seconds later the next two released brakes and followed Bowers. About half way down the runway they all aborted the take-off, rolled to the end and then taxied back to take-off position. The second attempted take-off went exactly like the first. Half way down the runway they all aborted, went to the end of the runway and taxied back to take-off position. It was obvious they were going for the third attempt. By this time I was concerned that if they did take-off they might not have enough fuel to reach their destination, Managua, Nicaragua. They had used a considerable amount of fuel on the first two attempts. For the entire tour we never had direct radio contact with the F-86s because they had a UHF radio system and we in the F-84s had the VHF radio system. On the third attempt the F-86s got airborne safely. Later on the ground at Managua I talked to Bowers about the attempted take-

off at Mexico City. Bowers explained that on the first two attempts he had no intention of getting airborne, and was using that technique to use fuel and reduce his take-off weight. He said he was more concerned with getting airborne at Mexico City than having sufficient fuel to reach Managua, Nicaragua. With our F-84s and JATO we had no take-off problem with the high elevation.

Before the air show at Managua Major Bowers asked me if his F-86 pilot could come down the runway and make a low-level high-speed pass after he did the sonic boom. I told him that would be OK if the pilot had enough fuel to go back to high altitude and loiter while the Thunderbirds did their demonstration. To attain Mach 1, and boom, the F-86 had to drop the external fuel tanks, and do the mission using only the internal fuel in the aircraft. Internal fuel allowed approximately one hour of flight time. Bowers assured me that the pilot had sufficient fuel to do the “sonic boom”, the high-speed pass, and loiter until our demonstration was completed.

The '86F pilot was Captain Dean Ray. He completed the sonic boom, the low level pass and climbed back to altitude to loiter while the Thunderbirds performed. We were about half way through the Thunderbird demonstration when our Command aircraft, a C-54, that had both the VHF and the UHF radios called me on the radio. He told me the F-86 pilot had called him and reported that he was getting low on fuel, but that he thought he had enough fuel to wait until the Thunderbirds completed their demonstration. I requested the controller in the C-54 to ask the F-86 pilot how much fuel he had remaining. After a few seconds the controller called me back and told me the pilot said he had 500 pounds remaining. That isn't much in a jet fighter. I told the controller to call him and tell him that I was stopping my demonstration and leaving the area and that he was to land immediately. I moved our flight away from the runway and watched for the F-86 to come in on initial approach for his pattern and landing. I spotted him as he was approaching the runway on initial at 1,000 feet, and positioned my flight to come in behind him. My intent was to start the Thunderbird demonstration again as soon as he landed. I was well behind him and saw him pitch and start his pattern for the landing. I continued to the far end of the runway, performed the Whifferdill turn around and was coming back down the runway to begin our demonstration again. I looked for the F-86 on the runway but couldn't see it. About a half mile past the end of the runway I saw a billow of black smoke. That was from Captain Ray's crash! Captain Ray had flamed out (ran out of fuel) just short of the runway and crashed. Sad to say, he was killed. Of course I canceled the rest of our demonstration and prepared to come in and land. However, the spectators had run on to the runway and thousands were massed on the runway. Now I had a real problem. Unless the spectators could be cleared from the runway I had four aircraft airborne with no place to land. We normally performed our show with a minimum amount of fuel on board to make the aircraft lighter and easier to maneuver. We always landed immediately after the last maneuver with minimum fuel in the aircraft (500 pounds). I conserved fuel as much as possible and pleaded with the controller to get the people off the runway. It was a difficult situation! I waited as long as possible and then told the controller I was coming in to land with four aircraft. The people weren't off the runway but a clear lane was beginning to form in the center of the runway. We landed safely, but the people stayed on the runway and were close enough to touch our aircraft as we flashed by them at 150 mph.

At that time the President of Nicaragua was Samosa, the dictator who for many years ran the country with an iron hand. He declared a national day of mourning for Captain Ray and also

directed that a commemorative stamp for Ray be issued. That evening we were wined and dined at the President's palace. The drive out to his palace was interesting. It was built well out from the city in the hills. All along the road going to his palace were permanent gun emplacements, and many armored tanks.

Our next stop was Panama City, Panama. As I recall we were in Panama for three days which was our longest stay in any country. In every country we visited the President or the Minister of Defense feted us. That was nice but it presented a problem. Protocol demanded that we remain at the dinner or reception until the ranking dignitary departed. This rather large U.S. force, and the first jets in the country, presented each country with an excuse for a big party, and the ranking dignitary sometimes stayed until one or two AM, which meant we had to stay. There were times when we got to bed at 3 AM and had to be airborne by 6 AM to reach the next country on schedule. The tour from beginning to end was 30 days, and it was TOUGH! There were no incidents in Panama worth talking about. The Air Force Southern Command had their headquarters in Panama and the Commander was Major General Ruben C. Hood. General Hood decided he would go with us for the remainder of the tour through South America. He was a first class officer, and before the tour was completed Chuck Yeager checked him out in his T-33.

After Panama we proceeded to Lima, Peru. Our air demonstration was routine. Yeager did his maximum performance take-off in the T-33, and the F-86 did the sonic boom. I deleted the low-level fly by for the F-86 and we had no more accidents. In almost every country we visited that had an Air Force, the Thunderbird pilots were made "Honorary" members of their Air Force and we were presented with pilot wings. Air Force regulations required that Air Force Headquarters approve the acceptance the Wings and we had to give them to the Headquarters representative who was with us on the tour. I never saw them again!

The next country we visited was Chile. Santiago, Chile is situated close to the Andes mountain range, and very close to the Pacific Ocean. The air demonstration went well, i.e., no incidents. The morning we took-off for Argentina the field was 0-0 (no ceiling and no visibility). The airfield was blanketed with dense fog. In the States we would not have been permitted to take-off because of regulations prohibiting flying in these weather conditions. We had to be in Argentina that day and it was my decision to go, or not to go. Chile had no regulation prohibiting flying in these conditions. I decided to go! I was aware there were small hills around the airfield, but the runway we were supposed to use for take-off was not toward the hills. The fog was so dense the control tower could not see us taxi out to the take-off runway, and it was difficult for us to visually follow the taxi strip. We made it to the runway OK, but I didn't realize there were two runways with the take-off direction about 30 degrees apart. I don't remember the exact runway headings but, for example, one was 210 degrees, and the other was 240 degrees. I lined up on the wrong runway and didn't realize it, and the tower couldn't see us. We took off and got airborne. Normally after take-off we all raise our take-off flaps on my signal, and I reduce power slightly to help the wingmen hold their position. For some reason, instinct maybe, I didn't signal to raise take-off flaps, and I didn't reduce power, and I climbed at a steeper than normal angle. We broke out on top of the fog at about 1,500 feet and there right in front of me, sticking out of the fog, were two hilltops. Had I not changed my climb procedure we all would have ended up in those hills. Scary!

Our demonstrations in Buenos Aries went well with one exception. Again, an F-86 pilot was involved! Captain Bill Lilly, a Korean jet ace, was the pilot Major Bowers selected to perform the sonic boom for this demonstration. We had a high thin overcast at 10,000 feet. As Lilly took-off to climb to altitude (35,000 feet) the overcast covered about half the airfield, and the rest of the sky was clear. It takes several minutes to climb to 35,000 feet, and during this period the overcast moved and now covered the airfield. I'm not sure what Lilly was doing on his climb to altitude, but he wasn't paying attention. When it was time for him to point the nose down at the airfield and pick up Mach 1 speed, he didn't see the airfield because the high thin cloud layer covered the airfield. It was unbelievable but Bill Lilly became "lost"! I wasn't aware there was a problem until I started up our flight and began to taxi. I couldn't hear Lilly's side of the conversation but I could hear our C-54 controller talking to him. From the questions and advice the controller was transmitting to Lilly, I knew he was lost and in deep trouble. I heard our controller say to him, "Did you say you're following a coast line, and your flying at 1,000 feet, and you only have 500 pounds of fuel remaining"? It was time for me to take-off and that was the last news I had until we completed the Thunderbird demonstration and landed. I was convinced that we had lost the second F-86.

There was good news though. Lilly had found a small dirt airfield about 2,000 feet long and with skill and cunning had landed there safely, and there was no damage to the aircraft. No one was sure the F-86 could get airborne on a 2,000-foot dirt airfield. There was a lot of speculation as to whether it was possible or not. Chuck Yeager volunteered that he once made a take-off in an F-86 in 1,700 feet, but it was on a concrete runway. That was good enough for us, so several barrels of fuel was trucked to the aircraft and it was refueled with just the bare minimum to take-off and fly to Buenos Aries. Bill Lilly made a successful take-off and got the aircraft back to Buenos Aries undamaged. There's a cute story though about conversations and thoughts between Major Bowers and Lilly just before the take-off. Lilly had volunteered to fly it off the dirt strip because he put it there and he was going to get it out. As Lilly was strapping into his chute etc., his squadron commander, Major Bowers was standing on the wing beside the cockpit. He later told me that he knew Lilly was nervous, and he said to Bill Lilly, "Now Bill, if you have any doubt, any doubt at all, about doing this take-off, just say the word and I'll take it"! Bowers also told me that if Lilly had said "OK Boss I do have doubts and you take it", the aircraft would still be sitting there because he wasn't about to attempt the take-off. Bill Lilly later told me that when Bowers told him he would make the take-off, he really wanted to climb out of the cockpit and say, "Thanks, you got it Boss", and let Bowers fly it out. He didn't climb out because he knew he would lose face, but the offer from Bowers was sure tempting.

The only other incident in Argentina was our meeting with President Juan Peron. His wife Eva had been dead for about a year and he was still wearing the black armband. He was a spectator at the air show and later we were all invited to a formal reception and dinner. Peron presented me with a large (24 inches by 18 inches) framed portrait of himself inscribed, "A Ricardo Con Gran Afecto". I kept the framed portrait for many years, but never displayed it. It remained in a box in the garage until I made a move in 1984 at which time I discarded it. Now that I have an "I Love Me" room I wish I had kept the portrait to hang on the wall.

From Argentina we flew to Rio De Janeiro, Brazil. We may have spent three days in Rio. We met an ex-Polish fighter pilot who had immigrated to Brazil and started a mining operation, and was very successful and wealthy. One of the things he mined was semi-precious stones.

Being a fighter pilot he was eager to do something for the Thunderbirds and Chuck Yeager. He invited us to his office in downtown Rio on a Sunday afternoon to show us something. When we arrived he opened a safe and took out bags of cut semi-precious stones. He asked us to hold out our hands and he then poured stones from each bag into our hands. There were large topaz, zircons, amethysts, and some(a valuable blue stone), and odds and ends of less semi-precious stones. I wrapped them in my handkerchief, took them home and distributed them to my family and relatives.

From Brazil we proceeded to Montevideo, Uruguay. The only memorable thing about Montevideo was that we could go to a restaurant and drink the water, eat a salad, and eat ice cream without fear of becoming ill. In *every other country* in South America we could not drink the water, eat raw vegetables, or ice cream. We couldn't even use the water to brush our teeth. Montevideo was the only city that had health standards commensurate with those in the U.S.

We next flew to Recife, Brazil, did our show, and then flew to Dominican Republic where we again had a successful air demonstration. From there we flew to British Guiana, and then to Caracas, Venezuela. In many countries huge swarms of buzzards caused us some concern when the swarm was close to the airfield while we were performing. At Caracas they were a real problem. There were several masses of buzzards gliding around in a vertical cone several hundred feet high. There were hundreds, if not thousands of buzzards in each cone. At Caracas it was impossible to avoid some of them, but I tried. On two occasions when I was pulling up to a vertical position with our flight of four, I went directly through a swarm of buzzards. Each time I cringed and expected every aircraft to be damaged. A miracle! Somehow we pushed air ahead of the aircraft, and the buzzards gliding on the wind currents must have been deflected away from the aircraft enough for us to miss them.

From Caracas we flew to our last stop, Havana, Cuba. This was in January 1954, before Castro, and Batista was still the President (Dictator) of Cuba. They literally rolled out the red carpet for us. We put on a good air show and the tour was finished. It was whirlwind tour, and very demanding on the pilots. It was educational, exciting and we enjoyed it, but we were all glad it was over.

After reviewing this file I have to tell you that it isn't in chronological order! However, it's all there, and I'm not going to try and "cut and paste" to put it in order. I'd probably lose half of it.

This incident occurred when Creech, Spalding, and McCormick were flying with me. I'll relate the incident because it's the first and only time I **EVER** tried to "shine my fanny" with the team. We were scheduled for a show at Columbus, Ohio. The Navy Blue Angels were also there to perform. We had performed with them at several previous shows, knew them very well, and had a lot of respect for all members of the team. The Thunderbirds performed first, and as we taxied out I noticed that all the Angel pilots were standing on the wings of their aircraft. Their aircraft were parked on the runway we would be working up and down during our performance. At some point in our show I decided that when I came down from an over the top maneuver (Loop), I'd bottom out so the Angel pilots standing on the wings would be looking down at our formation. Not a good decision! Coming down the back side of one loop I decided this was the time to impress the Angels. Determining the correct stick back pressure to use to avoid hitting

the ground starts as the formation starts downward. The back pressure must be gradual and always smooth, or wing and slot pilots would have a rough time holding a steady position. If the leader should misjudge, and abruptly apply back pressure to avoid the ground, in all probability the wing and slot pilots couldn't react fast enough and would hit the ground. To bottom out low enough for the Angels to look down at us, and do it smoothly, required more concentration than I had imagined. I bottomed out as low as I possibly could, and immediately thought I had gone **TOO LOW!** I could feel the thump of the ground effect on my aircraft---which means one is very close to the ground. My heart was in my throat! I could see Creech and Spalding, but the slot pilot, McCormick, was always slightly lower than us, and behind us. I was afraid that I had "scraped" him off! We were pulling a steady 4 Gs at the bottom and always held the Gs constant as we went into the next maneuver. As we're heading skyward I knew the tower operator was going to transmit, "We have a crash on the runway". Finally I pushed my microphone button and said, "Mac??". Much to my relief Mac said, "Still here Smokey!" (Smokey was our flight call sign). Again---that was the first and last time I ever tried to "shine my fanny" in an aircraft.

This is a small incident but since it involved a celebrity I'll describe the event. We were scheduled for a show at Lowery AFB, Denver, Colorado. Jimmy Stewart, the actor, was at Lowery for the filming of "The Glenn Miller Story". Stewart was playing the role of Glenn Miller who was a Captain in the Air Force when he was killed in a plane crash. Stewart was wearing a suntan uniform, with blouse, with a Captain's insignia in the shoulders. After we completed our demonstration Jimmy Stewart came over to my aircraft to offer congratulations, etc. As usual after a demonstration a lot of kids gathered around wanting me to sign whatever kind of paper they had in their hand. They were shoving this Captain, Jimmy Stewart, out of the way to get MY autograph. It was really embarrassing for me and I looked up at Jimmy Stewart with a look of apology, and he gave me a big grin. He understood!

There was a big Air Force celebration at Kitty Hawk to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Powered Flight. The Thunderbirds were scheduled to perform at the Kitty Hawk site where the first powered flight took place December 17, 1903. The nearest airfield that could support our jets was Langley AFB, near Norfolk, Virginia and approximately 100 miles from the Kitty Hawk site. We operated out of Langley, taking off, flying down to Kitty Hawk, do the demonstration and fly back to Langley to land. There were many aircraft participating in the show at Kitty Hawk and for timing purposes all participating aircraft had to fly a practice mission the day before the December 17 show. You wouldn't think flying 100 miles to the show site, fly the demonstration, and fly the 100 miles back to Langley would present a fuel problem. But it did!

The F-84 has an internal fuel tank in the nose of the aircraft. If the nose tank is full the nose of the aircraft is very heavy and for all Thunderbird demonstrations we deliberately used up most of the fuel in the nose tank prior to beginning the first maneuver of the demonstration. Normally after the last maneuver, the bomb burst, we were down to "emergency" fuel. This wasn't a problem because normally we landed at the airfield where we were performing. For the practice mission at Kitty Hawk I started the demonstration with a little more fuel in the nose tank than normal because we had to fly the 100 miles back to Langley. I didn't do much calculating or flight planning because instinctively I knew we could *probably* make it back to Langley even if we finished the demonstration as we usually did, with only emergency fuel remaining. So, starting the demonstration with a *little* more fuel in the nose tank would take all the sweat out of the return trip to Langley. Wrong! I was OK, but I hadn't anticipated all the questions and advice

I got from the other members of the flight when we departed Kitty Hawk and were on “emergency” fuel almost immediately. Everyone really got “antsy” about our fuel state and of course this made me a little nervous. We had a lot of conversation on our TAC radio frequency. We made it to Langley and still had a few minutes of fuel remaining. The next day, after the air show on the 17th, we had the same conversations and concerns on the way back to Langley, but we landed safely with several minutes of fuel remaining. The weather was clear and no clouds both days or we couldn’t have cut it as close as we did.

The second day after the demonstration there was a luncheon at a large hotel near the Kitty Hawk monument and the Thunderbird team members were invited to attend. More than that, we were required to attend! Before we took off for the demonstration at Kitty Hawk (100 miles away), we packed our Class A uniforms in our B-4 bags and put them in the nose of our aircraft. We knew that as soon as we recovered at Langley we would have to board a waiting C-45 twin engine Beechcraft and be flown to a small landing field several miles from the hotel near Kitty Hawk. We hurriedly unloaded our B-4 bags and boarded the C-45. The C-45 is a small aircraft but we all managed to change from our flying suits into our uniform enroute to the small airport. After landing we then boarded a waiting helicopter that transported us to hotel where it landed on the lawn in front of the hotel. We made the luncheon! There were several well-known people at the luncheon. Present were, the Air force Chief of Staff, General Nate Twining, General Jimmy Doolittle who led the B-25s on the first Tokyo bombing mission, Betty Skelton a famous lady aviator, and several others.

The Pattillo twins decided that one year of traveling and being away from their family was enough, and left the team about May of 1954. As I recall the team flew approximately 100 demonstrations and was away from home about 235 days the first year. Bill Brock, our narrator, and public relations officer also decided one year of traveling was enough and left the team. I now had to select and train replacement pilots, and select a replacement for Bill Brock. Selection of personnel for the team was the responsibility of the Commander/Leader---me! I had complete authority with regard to the selection process. Today, the Team Commander is in the selection loop but each new pilot member is approved at the Major Command level by a four star General, and the selection of personnel is a long and lengthy process.

My first choice for a replacement pilot was Lt. Bill Creech. I may have met Creech but had never flown with him. When I was the Group Operations officer I often went down to our air-to-ground gunnery range at Gila Bend to observe instructors and students delivering practice ordnance on the ground targets. One pilot stood out! I watched this pilot make skip bomb runs that were so low you couldn’t see his aircraft because of the cactus. At first I was concerned that the aircraft would hit the ground. I expressed my concern to the range officer and he told me not to worry, that it was Bill Creech, and he always flew that kind of a pattern. I watched and sure enough, he did! With any other pilot it would have been an accident waiting for a place to happen. But, obviously Creech was in complete control. I was impressed! He was also the number one man on the Luke gunnery team and there was a National Air Force gunnery meet scheduled in a few weeks. I had doubts that Colonel Chase would release him to join the Thunderbirds. I approached Chase and asked him if he would agree to release Creech and he said he would. I then contacted Creech and asked him if he would like to join the team and he enthusiastically answered affirmative. My next choice was Captain Burt Spalding, also an F-84 instructor in one of the training squadrons. Buck and Bill Pattillo highly recommended Burt for

the job. I contacted Burt, after talking to Chase, and Burt was enthusiastic about becoming a member of the Thunderbirds. In addition to being a superior pilot Burt was a “personality”. He had wit, intellect, and charm (usually not common in fighter pilots). He was ideal for the Thunderbird Team.

Captain Bob Kanaga, our first slot pilot, got out of the Air Force and I moved the spare pilot, Captain McCormick, to the slot position. Our Maintenance officer, Lt. A.D. Brown continued as the maintenance officer but also became our spare pilot. “Brownie” demonstrated his superior pilot ability when I had to call on him, with little notice, to fill in when someone in the diamond formation had an emergency and couldn’t fly a show. Captain Bill Brock our narrator and public relations officer was replaced by Lt. Al Davis. Training of Creech and Spalding required only a few missions.. The biggest problem in training a fighter pilot for the Thunderbird mission was getting his right arm in physical condition. The elevator on the F-84 was not hydraulically boosted and holding the 4-G’s continually for the entire demonstration required the pilot keep back pressure on the “stick”. Usually in the first few practice missions the new pilot would ask for a brief rest for his arm after five minutes of maneuvering. Once his right arm was conditioned he was ready to fly an official show. Although we trained two new pilots we didn’t stand down and didn’t miss a scheduled performance. Today the Team replaces two pilots every year and they stand down for three months to train the two new pilots.

Al Davis our new narrator was about six feet, short blonde hair, good-looking, very articulate, and a good athlete. Al had never flown fighters, but was qualified in the T-33 so we added a T-33 to our inventory and painted it red, white, and blue to match the Thunderbird color scheme and Al traveled to the demonstrations in the T-33. During this time period the National Air Show was always held at the Vandalia airport in Dayton, Ohio and the Thunderbirds performed there each year. I wasn’t aware of the following story until we returned to Luke and Creech and Spalding related this to me. After a demonstration we always landed, and parked our aircraft near the spectators. Very soon we would have a crowd around us asking questions, etc. Al Davis, our narrator, usually had a crowd too. On this occasion Creech and Spalding overheard Al answering a question about which position he flew. Al told the crowd that he rotated with the wingmen and slot pilot---and that today was his day to be the narrator. Creech, Spalding and McCormick were very upset that Al was posing as a flying member of the team. It also followed that on some days one of them was the "narrator". They all were really irritated and thought I should do something immediately. I was very magnanimous about Al and told them not to worry about it, that there was no harm done and that Al made a good impression with the public, and not to get upset about it. Our black flying suits, that my little wife dyed for us, had the Thunderbird patch on the right side, and above the pocket on the left side was our first name embroidered in white. Without my knowledge, the next time our flying suits went to the cleaners, Creech, Spalding, and McCormick had the team position embroidered below the name, e.g., Dick—Leader, Mac---Slot, Bill---Right Wing, Bert---Left Wing. and below Al’s name—Narrator! I thought it was hilarious and didn’t say anything. It solved the problem!

There’s a little sequel to this story, and this time I wasn’t quite as magnanimous about it. Many years later in 1968 I was the Wing Commander at Luke AFB in Phoenix. The International Order of Characters had their annual convention at a plush resort in Phoenix. Many famous people from all walks of life are members of this organization such as racecar drivers, experimental test pilots, Doctors, Lawyers, etc. Lockheed Aircraft Company had a table at the

dinner and invited my wife and I to attend the dinner and sit at their table. There was to be speeches and introduction of honored members. I'm sitting at the table waiting for the ceremony to begin when Al Davis, now a Major, comes up to the table, kneels down beside me and says, "I thought you might be here because I knew you were at Luke. I thought I better tell you that I'm a member of the International Order of Characters and its possible that I might be introduced as the First Leader of the Thunderbirds. I just want you to know that I had absolutely nothing to do with it, my friends told the organization that I was the first leader, and I keep telling them I wasn't but they keep insisting that I was. I just want you to know it wasn't my doing". Well, I wasn't quite as understanding as I was when Creech and Spalding complained that Davis was telling people that he flew left or right wing on a rotational basis! If Davis was introduced as the first leader I was going to the microphone and tell the audience that he not the first leader and that he had never flown on the Thunderbird team, and further he had never flown a fighter aircraft in his life. He wasn't introduced that evening. Davis has never attended a Thunderbird reunion and I can understand why!

About six months before my tour was completed the Team was assigned six F-84F's. The '84 F was a supersonic aircraft (just barely), with swept wings. We painted the aircraft red, white, and blue, and practiced in them. We found we could do the same routine as with the '84 G, but we experienced severe maintenance problems with them. The aircraft had a YJ-65 engine that was having problems, as well as the electrical and hydraulic systems. Because of maintenance problems we were never able to take them far enough from home to use them in an official show. During this period Brownie and his maintenance people had to maintain two sets of completely different aircraft.

General Born was promoted to Major General and transferred to Randolph AFB, Texas as the Commander of the Crew Training Air Force (Crew TAF). Our new commander at Luke was Brigadier General T.C. Rogers. General Rogers called me one day and told me had just received a message from our Headquarters assigning a Lieutenant (I don't recall his name) to Luke for assignment to the Thunderbirds. Rogers stated he had no idea who he was or who had assigned him to the team, but that when he reported in he would be assigned to the Thunderbirds! My nose was really out of joint! Selecting Thunderbird replacement personnel was my responsibility and I didn't want anyone usurping my authority! The young lieutenant (Pilot) reported to me and presented the orders assigning him to the team. I was courteous and polite and didn't question him about how he happened to get the assignment. I concluded he must be some General Officers son, or knew someone very high up in the hierarchy. I told him we didn't have a desk for him but that he could have "That chair". Those were my first and last words to the young lieutenant, and after about ten days of sitting in that chair he disappeared and I never saw or heard of him again. I never mentioned the lieutenant to General Rogers and he never asked me about him. To my knowledge the Thunderbirds never again received orders mandating a personnel assignment to the Thunderbirds.

Organizing and leading the Thunderbirds was a challenging and interesting job. It eventually became work, but fun and exciting work. However, all was not peaches and cream for the first team. We experienced various kinds of problems at several Air Force bases. I'll highlight a couple of episodes we experienced that today's team would never experience. I mentioned that there were no published regulations with regard to the Thunderbird operation. However, the Pentagon did publish a regulation that was disseminated to all Air Force bases describing the

minimum base requirements when the team was scheduled to perform at their base. The regulation required the base to provide us with lodging and transportation, and to set up a public address system so our narrator could describe the demonstration. Further, the base was required to close the runways for the period the demonstration would take place, and to publish a "Notice to All" that the base would be closed to transient aircraft for that period. (Safety considerations).

Every summer the college ROTC cadets go to an Air Force base for their summer encampment period. Part of the focus of having the dedicated Air Force Thunderbird team was to enhance recruiting. During the ROTC encampment period we performed at a different base almost daily. We were busy! We were scheduled into Nellis AFB to do the demonstration for the ROTC cadets. Brock always coordinated with each base, after the schedule was firm, to establish show time, etc. Nellis really didn't want to be bothered with the Thunderbirds and were always a little jealous because they didn't have the Thunderbird mission. (Eventually they did!). When possible the Pentagon wanted the base to invite the public, but didn't direct it for the ROTC demonstrations. Brock learned that Nellis wanted us to do the show at 6 AM. That was fine with me if that was the time they wanted. We arrived at Nellis the day before and found that very few people knew anything about us being there to perform. The ROTC cadets were lined up on the flight line and we took-off to start the show at 6 AM. Brock found that there was no public address system and he had to shout to narrate the show. I had completed only one maneuver when the tower called me and requested that I stop the show and leave the traffic pattern area. I asked why and was told that a flight of four F-86s from the Fighter Wing at Victorville, California was calling in for landing at Nellis. I explained that the runway was supposed to be closed to transient aircraft. The tower replied that the F-86s were low on fuel and had to land at Nellis. I left the immediate area and hoped the transient aircraft would expedite their landing so I would have enough fuel to complete the demonstration. I watched the F-86s make their pattern and land. Unfortunately three landed and one pulled up his landing gear and decided to go-around. The fourth one made a huge traffic pattern and took a lot of time before landing causing my flight to use too much fuel. I called the tower and told them I was canceling the show and was going to land behind the F-86. I was more than a little red-necked about the entire mess at Nellis!

Brigadier Jim Roberts, the Nellis Wing Commander met me at my aircraft and he was a little miffed that I had canceled the show, and wanted to know why. I told him that his people had really let him down. I explained that his Wing Operations officer had the notice regarding the show date, and the notice also outlined a few things the base was supposed to do, but the notice sat in his in-basket for a month and nothing had been done. I told him the crowning blow was that his people had not sent out a "Notice to All Airmen" (NOTAM) regarding closing the runway for the demonstration, and the transient aircraft landing at Nellis caused me to run too low on fuel. I told him that had I known the runway and airfield was not closed to all traffic I would never have taken off to do the show!

Eglin AFB, Florida was called The Air Proving Ground Command in the 1953, '54 time period. Eglin annually held a "Fire power" demonstration and in the summer of 1953 the Thunderbirds were scheduled to perform at the fire power demonstration. Aircraft and pilots from organizations throughout the Air Force were dispatched to Eglin to display the latest in aircraft and ordnance. The entire demonstration was conducted at an Eglin ground gunnery range and live ordnance, bombs, rockets, etc., were used. The audience sat in bleachers a safe distance

away from the fire zone. The invited guests were from all walks of life, i.e., industry, politicians, chamber of commerce, military, etc. The Pattillo's were still flying with me at this time.

We were to arrive at Eglin two days before the actual event to participate in a practice mission involving the numerous aircraft that would take part in the demonstration. This was a big event for the Air Force! I planned to arrive at Eglin the day before the practice mission. The morning we were to take-off for Eglin we had a very early breakfast, checked weather and learned that our local weather (Randolph AFB) was below take-off minimums. As is normal we went to our aircraft and sat on the ramp, in the cockpit, with our radio on and tuned to the flight clearance channel. We all sat in the cockpit for more than two hours awaiting clearance. Weather finally became OK for take-off and away we go to Eglin. We arrived at Eglin just before noon and were ready for lunch. Much to my surprise we were not allowed into the Officers Club to eat because the Club was reserved for all the VIPs (Very Important Persons) who were at Eglin to observe the fire power demonstration. I didn't like it, but I could understand the problem. I then requested transportation to go off base to eat lunch. I was told there was no transportation because it was reserved for the VIPs. This was two days before the arrival of the VIPs. I called several base people trying to find someone to authorize transportation for us to go off base to a restaurant. No luck! Some of the people I called asked me to stand by and they would work on the problem. Hours went by! No one could get us transportation! Finally, realizing it was fruitless, and we were really hungry by this time, we started calling friends stationed at Eglin to borrow a private vehicle. About 4 PM we found a car and went off base for "lunch". I was more than a little red necked!

To add insult to injury we found we could not stay in quarters on base, "All were reserved for the VIPs". Base billeting found us rooms at the Valpariso Inn. Using a friend's car we found the Inn and it was in a deplorable condition. It had no air conditioning, no elevators, and our rooms were on the third floor. The windows could be opened but there were Ivy vines completely covering the window, so not a breath of fresh air. None of us could get much sleep that night! The next morning we went to the briefing for all participating aircrews. There were numerous aircraft doing many different things and the primary focus of the briefing was the time to be on target at the demonstration site. The only thing I really needed to know was the time they wanted us to start our demonstration. The practice mission was conducted in the afternoon and all went well. There was one full day between the practice mission and the actual event. The Pentagon knew this and had scheduled that day for the Thunderbirds to do a show at Moody AFB, Valdosta, Georgia. Moody was only about 100 miles from Eglin and going there and back presented no timing problem. I planned to leave Eglin immediately after the practice mission debriefing and fly to Moody that evening to be on time for the demonstration the next day.

After the debriefing I contacted the full colonel in charge of the fire power demonstration and told him of my schedule for going to Moody. I also told him about our difficulties of transportation, eating, and sleeping at Eglin. I told him I planned to leave Moody and land at Tyndall AFB, Panama City, Florida. From Tyndall we were as close to the demonstration site as we were flying out of Eglin and there would be no problem making my designated time on target. Also, since Tyndall wasn't crowded we would be able to get transportation, quarters, and food on base. This full colonel turned out to be the most arrogant, macho, ignorant colonel nerd I've ever met. He told me there was no way he would approve my plan and that I was to return to Eglin and not even think about going to Tyndall. Thinking he had not fully understood my

problems I repeated my reasons for staging out of Tyndall. He seemed to be a little angry and said, "Major you'll do exactly what I tell you to do, you'll land here and not Tyndall". I said, "Colonel when I leave Moody I'm going to Tyndall, and I'll be at the demonstration site on time". With that I left! I was by this time a little angry also! We left Eglin and flew to Moody.

The next day I was in Base Operations at Moody preparing to take-off for their demonstration when someone told me I had a phone call. The call was from the nerd colonel at Eglin. We had quite a conversation that ended with him saying, "Major I'm giving you a direct order, when you leave Moody you'll land at Eglin"! I thought about that for a minute and told him OK, we would return to Eglin. However, I stipulated that because of the conditions at Eglin, lack of sleep at the Inn, etc., I considered it a flying safety problem and therefore the Thunderbirds would not perform, but we would return to Eglin as he ordered. That ended our conversation. We did the performance at Moody and I was once again in Base Operations filing a flight plan for Eglin when someone told me I had a phone call. It was the nerd colonel again! This time he was very conciliatory and informed me that he had arranged for us to stay on base and that we could eat in the Officers Club. I told him that would be great and thanked him for his efforts. I'm not sure why he changed 180 degrees. However, the whole episode at Eglin left a bitter taste in my mouth. I was not a happy camper with regard to Eglin AFB.

We returned to Eglin and as advertised had quarters on base and were permitted to eat in the Club. After we completed the demonstration at the gunnery range site the next day, we landed at Eglin. I hoped for the last time! After landing I had our aircraft refueled and planned to depart immediately for our next destination. It was a long flight and of course we filled all fuel tanks including the external tip tanks. We checked out of our quarters, went to Base Operations and filed a flight plan. We were all sitting in our aircraft and about ready to start engines for departure when a full colonel climbed up the ladder to talk to me. This colonel was a good guy, a fighter pilot. He had a long polish name so everyone called him, Colonel Jones. Standing on the ladder he explained to me that none of the base personnel had witnessed a fire power demonstration, and that he was working up an air show for the base personnel for the next day. He asked me to consider staying another day and participating in the show at Eglin AFB. I first said no, but he finally convinced me it would be a good thing to do for the base personnel. We got out of the aircraft, got quarters again and spent one more night at Eglin. By the way, I never saw the nerd colonel again!

The next day during the briefing for the air show I told the controller, Major Skinny Ennis, we would have to take off thirty minutes earlier than normal to burn out fuel in our external tip tanks. It presented no problem and I was given the exact time to come in and do our demonstration. We took-off thirty minutes earlier than normal, which was actually fifty minutes before show time. I *always* took-off twenty minutes before show time to burn fuel out of the nose tank and also do a few nip-ups away from the field to let everyone get the feel of the air turbulence, and relax. Our flight had not been airborne more than ten minutes when Major Ennis, the controller called me on the radio and informed me that the show was progressing much faster than expected and it would be very much appreciated if I could come in and start the performance now. I informed him that I still had lots of fuel in the external tanks and couldn't possibly start before all the fuel was out of the tanks. We dropped speed brakes and pushed the power up to burn fuel faster. It required about twenty more minutes to burn out the external fuel, and I started the show with a full nose tank, which wasn't good, but I tried as best I could to

accommodate the controller and the audience on the ground. The most boring thing in the world is to be watching an air show and there's nothing to watch. We completed the show, landed, refueled and departed Eglin.

Approximately two weeks later we were at home at Luke and General Rogers came down to my office with a sheaf of papers he wanted me to read. The basic correspondence, a two page single space letter, was signed by Major General Patrick W. Timberlake, the Air Proving Ground Commander at Eglin. The correspondence had been forwarded through channels up to his major command and then down through our command channels to Luke and now to me. Every organization up and down the line had an endorsement with some comment. General Rogers asked me to read it, that he was sure there was two sides to the story and for me to prepare the reply. The letter from Timberlake was very critical of me while at Eglin for the fire power demonstration. Obviously the nerd Colonel wrote the letter and Timberlake signed it. The essence of the letter was that I was "getting too big for my britches, etc, etc". There was also some language about my leadership ability and not being competent to supervise my maintenance personnel in that I allowed them to overload the fuel tanks in our aircraft causing a delay in us starting our demonstration on time. The letter also said that as a result of my lack of leadership the spectators at the air show sat for 20 minutes while I was flying around the area doing nothing. The letter badly misrepresented the facts. I was more than delighted to respond to the letter because before receiving the letter there was no way I could vent my frustration and irritation about the nerd colonel and the foul up at Eglin AFB. In my response I recited chapter and verse of events from our waiting in the cockpit for more than two hours to take-off for the flight to Eglin, to my take-off departing Eglin. I wish I could remember the nerd colonel's name now, but I don't. When I wrote my response his name appeared many times, and in a very critical manner. My response was pretty much verbatim of all the events as I've described above and for me brought the Eglin trip to a satisfactory "closure". The response went back through all the channels and I'm sure everyone up and down the line read the response. I have no idea what happened to the nerd colonel, but I heard nothing more about the affair.

One other small flying incident is worth telling. We did a show somewhere in the Northeast, I think it was dedicating a new airport in New Hampshire. After the show we took off for Atlanta, Georgia with five aircraft. Enroute we ran into some pretty good weather (thunderstorms). Penetrating the weather we flew a five ship V, with Creech and Brownie on one wing and Spalding and McCormick on the other. We came out of a fairly large thunderstorm where we had been bounced around in unison, and were on top of an undercast. Everyone was happy to be out of the storm and there was a lot of "jolly" chatter. Just ahead directly in our path was the tops of a young thunderstorm that was still building. I told everyone to be ready, that this one could be tough. Everyone settled down, and we penetrated the storm. It was tougher! About half way through the storm a bolt of lightning hit my aircraft. I didn't see it because my eyes were in the cockpit reading the gages, but it sounded like a 500 pound bomb went off under my seat. Of course everyone flying wing had their eyes only on the lead aircraft and saw the lightning hit, and I could tell by the radio calls they were really concerned. Not whether or not I was okay, but was my aircraft okay. Their real concern was about the condition of the instruments that I was using to keep us straight and level in the storm. Everyone began asking questions at the same time. I could understand their problem because if my instruments weren't working, they were "outa here". We all soon determined that my aircraft was okay and we went merrily on our way down to Atlanta.

In late 1954, General Born was now the CTAF Commander but still seemed to have a special interest in the team that he started at Luke. On a trip to Luke General Born visited our office and we talked about the length of tour for Thunderbird pilots. The Pattillos had spent a year with the team and I was approaching 18 months. At this time there was no set time for a tour. General Born asked me if I thought 18 months was long enough because of the amount of time the team members were away from their family. I told him 18 months seemed reasonable. It so happened that we had a show scheduled at Memphis, Tennessee, my hometown, in about 6 weeks. I told General Born that I would make Memphis my last show which would finish an 18-month tour.

At some time during my tour the Pentagon decided to do something nice for pilots leaving the team. A policy was established giving us our choice of assignments within the Air Force, commensurate with our rank. My first choice was to be an F-86 squadron commander. The F-86 was our first supersonic fighter. I didn't take advantage of the policy because on my own initiative I had more or less worked out a deal with the Wing Commander at Victorville, California for a squadron commander job in his wing.

General Rogers, our Luke Commander talked to me about selecting an officer as my replacement. I told him I thought it absolutely necessary the new leader be at least a Major, and preferably a Lt. Colonel because of problems confronting the team at many locations. He concurred and asked me to do the screening and selecting. My first choice was Major Bob Evans, my good friend from Willy, Nellis, and Alaska. Bob was now the commander of our gunnery range at Gila Bend. I contacted Bob and briefed him about the job and told him I thought he should take the job. He wanted to talk to his wife before he made a commitment. He discussed it with his wife and the next day told me he was declining the job for several reasons. It seemed the major problem was the time he would be away from home. My second choice was Major Mal Armstrong. I contacted Mal and offered him the job. He also wanted to talk to his wife before making a decision. The next day he declined the job for the same reasons as Bob Evans. I was very surprised and disappointed that they both turned down the best job in the Air Force. In my estimation there were no other Majors at Luke qualified for the job, and we had no Lt. Colonels.

I briefed General Rogers about my efforts to find a new leader. I told him there were no other Majors at Luke I could recommend, and before we went to "the bottom of the barrel" I would change my recommendation about having a Major leading the team. I told him I thought Captain Jack Broughton who had worked for me in Group Operations would do an outstanding job with the team. Jack was now at Laughlin AFB, Del Rio, Texas. If Jack had been a Major he would have been my first choice, but initially I felt strongly that the leader should be a Major. Jack had all the qualifications I thought necessary for the job and from the standpoint of leadership would be better than my other choices. He was a captain but an extremely strong captain and I thought he would soon be promoted to major. General Rogers agreed with my selection and called Colonel Tom Moseley at Laughlin to see if he would release Broughton. He agreed to release Broughton. I called Broughton and asked him how soon he could come to Luke. He was so enthusiastic about the job he said he would be at Luke like yesterday, or it would take him all of two hours to pack! Captain Jack Broughton became the second Thunderbird leader/commander.

I was going to cover this in my next file, “Randolph and Japan”, but since it’s directly pertinent to the Thunderbirds it should be included here.

These are the facts about how the Thunderbirds came to be transferred to Nellis AFB. My assignment after Luke was to CTAF Headquarters, Randolph AFB. Sometime after reporting in to my new assignment I requested permission to go to Nellis to check out in the new F-100. Permission was granted and I went to Nellis and checked out in the aircraft, the F-100A. Although it had some engine problems it was a wonderful aircraft to fly. It was our first “truly supersonic” aircraft. It went through Mach 1, or the speed of sound, like a hot knife through butter. From the cockpit the pilot didn’t know he was over Mach 1 unless he looked at the Mach meter. I was curious about how the F-100 might perform the Thunderbird routine. On my first mission (not quite on the deck) I went through the Thunderbird routine from beginning to end. I was delighted to find the F-100 could do the job as well as the F-84.

Back at Randolph I immediately called Jack Broughton about the F-100 and asked him if he wanted me to start working on getting the Thunderbirds converted to a real supersonic aircraft. At that time Jack said “No”, that they had recently converted to full time use of the F-84F (with a new engine, and tail), and that he would like to see how that aircraft worked out. I said okay and told him to call me if he changed his mind.

Some time passed, and one day I had a call from Jack. They were having real maintenance problems with the ‘84F, and Broughton asked me if I could do anything about getting the team converted to the F-100. I told him I’d try!

My job was Director of Inspection, and after every major inspection I briefed the CTAF Commander, one-on-one, the results of the inspection. General Charley Born had retired, and the present commander of CTAF was Major General Frank Robinson. The next time I debriefed General Robinson, at the end of the briefing, I asked him if he had ever considered converting the Thunderbirds to the F-100, and make them a supersonic Air Force Team. I really didn’t expect much of a response from him, but his eyes lit up immediately. He asked me with some enthusiasm if I thought it would work. I told him of my limited experience in the F-100, and that I was sure the aircraft could do the job. Much to my surprise he immediately called Colonel Stan Smith, his Director of Operations, to his office. He briefly told Colonel Smith of our conversation and then and there directed Colonel Smith to “cut orders for the Thunderbird Team members to go to Nellis, check out in the F-100, and for them to report whether the F-100 was suitable for the mission”. For some reason Stan Smith gave me a really dirty look. I guess he thought I was getting into his business. General Robinson seemed to be as much of an “operator” as General Born.

Broughton and the team went to Nellis, checked out in the F-100, and on their check-out flight formed up in the diamond, and roared over the flight line and housing area. (that’s what I heard). Obviously the F-100 was suitable for the Thunderbirds!

The thought never entered my mind that the mission might be transferred to Nellis AFB. Initially all the conversations were about transferring the required number of F-100’s to Luke. The Thunderbird mission belonged to Luke! Had I thought the mission might be transferred I would never have mentioned converting to F-100’s to anyone! The Deputy Chief for

Maintenance at CTAF got in the act and convinced General Robinson that the small number of F-100's couldn't be maintained at Luke. That's when Robinson said transfer the mission to Nellis! At first, no personnel were to be transferred, only the mission. I was sick! Jack was sick! Everyone on the team was very ill! I don't remember if Jack called me, or I called him, about all team members volunteering to transfer to Nellis. Anyway I learned that the present team wanted to go enmasse to Nellis, and talked to General Robinson about transferring the entire team. They were transferred, and that's why Nellis now has the mission.

One last word about the Thunderbirds. Selecting pilots and officers for the Team was my responsibility, and mine alone! Today the selection process is lengthy, and many people are involved in the selection process, including the Commander of the Tactical Air Command (A 4-star General). When I reflect back on the pilots I selected, and their career in the Air Force, it's obvious I missed my calling. I should have been in the personnel business! I knew that I had selected outstanding pilots and officers, and their record substantiates that. For the record, Buck and Bill Pattillo, the first two wingmen, and Bill Creech, Bert Spalding, the second set of wingmen, all retired as General officers. Bill Creech, after more than 6 years as Commander of the Tactical Air Command, retired as a 4-star General. Buck Pattillo retired as a 3-star General, Bill Pattillo retired as a 2-star General, and Bert Spalding retired as a 2-star General. Their record didn't surprise me. I knew I had selected outstanding officers, and they made me very proud! I've never checked but I'm sure no other team had officers who attained the record of those selected for the first team.

Bob McCormick was a superb pilot. His intellectual curiosity demanded that he learn all there was to know about the subject at hand. As a result he always knew more about the business he was in than his immediate boss. Unfortunately, he was seldom diplomatic enough in letting his boss know that he was better informed, and this created friction's during most of his career. I admired this trait, but some of his other "bosses" did not. McCormick, after 30 years service retired as a Colonel. A.D. Brown, our first maintenance officer, and later a flying team member, had the misfortune of being an outstanding maintenance officer. Promotions are slow in the maintenance field. Finding a pilot who also excels in the maintenance field is rare. Unfortunately for Brownie, because of expertise in the maintenance field, most of his future assignments were in the maintenance field, and he retired in the grade of Colonel.

