

The Eagles have landed...

Air Force Academy Library hosts historic display



Retired Air Force Brig. General Philip Caine stands in front of the Eagle Squadron flag that flew over the British Royal Air Force in Debden when the Eagles transferred into the Army Air Force. The flag is part of an exhibit commemorating the Eagles of World War II.

By Jeremy Bangs

The Air Force Academy Library is host to an amazing exhibit commemorating the Eagle Squadrons of the Royal Air Force. Retired Air Force Brig. Gen. Philip D. Caine, who lives in Woodmoor, is one of the historians who set-up the exhibit.

Caine published a book covering

the Eagle Squadron in 1991 titled, "Eagles of the RAF," and is the Academy's resident expert on the unique fighter squadrons. Caine is an honorary member of the Eagle Squadrons Association, which made the Air Force Academy Library the official Eagle Squadron repository in 1989.

The three Eagle Squadrons 71, 121

and 133 consisted of 244 Americans who flew for the Royal Air Force prior to the U.S.'s involvement in World War II.

The RAF was in desperate need of pilots following the Battle of Britain in late 1940.

However, recruitment by foreign militaries was illegal in the United States at the time, which led to an

unofficial recruiting group led by World War I veteran Clayton Knight.

The Eagle Squadrons were the answer to frustrations of American pilots who didn't meet the stringent standards of the Army Air Force.

Caine said the Army required its
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pilots to have two years of college and be in near perfect physical condition.

The requirements went to the extreme of rejecting one man simply because he had two teeth missing. He then joined the Eagle Squadrons.

The Eagle Squadrons not only gave these pilots a chance to fly, they gave them the opportunity to fly Britain's Spitfires and Hurricanes, two of the world's elite fighter planes at that time, Caine said.

The Eagle pilots left for England from Canada to avoid U.S. restrictions over travel across the Atlantic. The pilots entered advanced flight training once they arrived in England before being assigned to the 71, 121 or 133 squadrons of the RAF Fighter Command.

The Eagles officially scored 73 1/2 "kills" during their two years of service with the RAF. However, Caine said the British didn't score downed aircraft as carefully as the U.S. and the number may have been higher.

Caine said the Eagles weren't as famous for their kill ratios as they were for boosting RAF moral.

Caine said the Eagles were very well received by the British.

On Sept. 29, 1942, all three Eagle Squadrons transferred into the Army Air Force and formed the Fourth Fight Group. By this time nearly half of the Eagles had been killed or taken prisoner.

Caine said it was this sacrifice that makes the Eagles especially deserving of the exhibit's title, "Service Above Self."

"They volunteered to go into a war that was not their own—for a country that, with one or two exceptions, none had seen. They had never been to war," said Caine.

The exhibit takes the viewer along the journey of the Eagle Squadrons. Caine tried to let the diaries, log books and personal letters narrate each step of the Eagle Squadrons' brief existence.

It begins with letters of acceptance into the RAF and FBI reports on the activities of the Clayton Knight



The exhibit has several uniforms worn by members of the Eagle Squadrons. They were highly recognizable to the English public who warmly received the Eagles when they arrived.

Committee.

Photos taken by Eagle Squadron members tell the story of crossing the Atlantic and the training each pilot went through in England.

An official telegram from the RAF to the family of Wilson Edwards announcing he is missing in action depicts the hardships that fell on the Eagles.

Edwards' sister attended the exhibit's March 17 opening and remembered receiving that telegram. Edwards survived the war and now serves as president of the Eagle Squadron Association.

One of the special moments of the

show is the Eagle Squadron flag that flew over the RAF station in Debden when members of the Eagle Squadron transferred into the Army Air Force.

Caine said he wanted to let the cadets learn about the squadron with as many actual accounts as possible. The result is one of the most positive cadet responses to any exhibit Caine can remember.

Caine said the spirit of the Eagles serves as an inspiration to the cadets at the academy.

"That's why the cadets are here at the institution. That's why the Air Force Academy exists," said Caine.