



**With a career spanning six decades, Keith Ferris has become an illustrious American aviation artist.**



# Airpower on

**K**eith Ferris was no stranger to the grass airfields of the 1930s. The son of an Army pilot, he grew up in the modified 1917 officer barracks at what was then Kelly Field in Texas. Airplanes would taxi along the old strips and park almost directly across the street from his house.

When he was just five, Ferris started drawing airplanes. That way, he could show his father, a flight instructor, what had landed while he was gone. Ferris spent most of his childhood watching the airplanes. In August 1947, just before the Air Force became a separate service, came an event that

would change the teenaged Ferris' life forever.

Aug. 1 was Air Force Day, and airmen at nearby Randolph Field were gearing up for a major air show. All week before, B-29 Superfortresses, P-51 Mustangs, and A-26 Invaders arrived at the base, and Ferris had the perfect view from his summer job at a small art studio on base.

"I was sitting there on the second floor of this World War II barracks, right on the flight line at Randolph when all of a sudden the barracks just went WOOOOOMPH. ... It was the shock of something I had never heard before," said Ferris. "I ran out on the little porch

of those World War II barracks and there were two planes effortlessly arching off across the sky. They were jets. I'd never seen a jet before."

As the jet aircraft taxied down to a parking space in front of the barracks, Ferris ran off to find a lifelong family friend—the flight surgeon at the School of Aviation Medicine. With just one roar of the engines, Ferris had decided he

*Above: "Farmer's Nightmare," 1930s era; pilot of P-12B No. 2 (on 1932 training mission) is artist's late father, Lt. Carlisle Ferris. Right: "Fortresses Under Fire," World War II era; B-17s fly 1944 mission over Germany while under Luftwaffe attack.*



# Canvas

By Amy McCullough



Courtesy Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum



**Above:** “Pursuit Section Instructors,” 1930s era; Lieutenant Ferris is in lead P-12B.  
**Below:** “Sunrise Encounter,” Cold War era; F-16 is shown in mock 1980 dogfight with “Soviet” Aggressor F-5 over Nellis AFB, Nev.

wanted to learn to fly those jet aircraft as soon as possible—he couldn’t wait another three years to graduate from college and get a commission. He therefore decided to join the Air Force flight cadet program, which would allow him to fly without getting a college degree.

### Speaking Air Force

The Air Force wouldn’t let him in. Ferris was allergic to eggs, which meant he could not receive the required vaccinations. He was instead forced into a different career. It has spanned six decades and has sent him to virtually every continent and onto flights aboard most of the Air Force’s bombers, fighters, and trainers—so that he could later document the missions on canvas.

At 22, Ferris was working for an art studio with some Air Force contracts for artwork illustrating weapons manuals. He was the only one there who could “speak Air Force,” he said, so the Air Force work came to him. Now 79, Ferris’ paintings hang in the Pentagon and many prominent museums, including the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Ferris became perhaps the most illustrious aviation artist in America.

Tens of millions have viewed his most famous work, “Fortresses Under Fire,” a 75-foot-by-25-foot mural that covers an entire wall in the NASM’s World War II Aviation Gallery. A B-17G Flying Fortress, one of several attacked by German fighters, looks as if it’s going





**Above:** “Air Superiority, Blue,” Cold War era; F-15 performs barrel roll in fictional 1970s fight with Soviet Su-15. **Below:** “Bad News for Uncle Ho,” Vietnam War era; eight F-4Es deploying to Korat RTAB, Thailand and their assigned KC-135 tankers begin 1968 mission.

to blast through the wall. The mural lets thousands of people experience the awe Ferris felt as a child.

Ferris has mastered the art: Some of his paintings are so exact that museum visitors have actually identified loved ones lost in combat.

His paintings document aviation history ranging from World War I ace Capt. Eddie Rickenbacker flying his famous SPAD, to the FW 190A-8/R8 Sturmböck flown by Luftwaffe pilots in World War II, to today’s C-17, as seen in “Waikiki Sunrise.”

“I think my father would be amazed and ... very pleased,” with this unique version of a military career, Ferris said.

### Father Figure

He included his father in several of his paintings, such as in “Pursuit Section Instructors,” which depicts eight P-12Bs of the 43rd Pursuit Squadron in flight from Kelly Field in 1932. In the No. 2 aircraft is Lt. Carlisle I. Ferris, who was the commandant of cadets.

“I place my dad in the same position as everybody else that I’ve flown with,” said Ferris. “It’s what has built my character. All the people that I’ve grown up and been associated with believe in getting the job done and doing it in the best possible way. It’s all in fulfilling the mission.”

Ferris’ contribution has gone beyond





art. He played a part in getting the Air Force to abandon various multicolor, dark, and camouflage paint schemes of the Vietnam era. He knew that the schemes, though popular, produced highly visible silhouettes. His painting of the first F-15, prior to flight, helped persuade the Air Force to abandon its planned blue paint; the painting, "Air Superiority, Blue," showed exactly how dark the supposedly sky-blue aircraft

could appear in flight.

Ferris noted that a scheme optimized for one condition "can become a high visibility system under different lighting." Matte-gray paint with counter-shading is now the norm. Visual "hot spots" are reduced by giving lighter paint to the portions of an aircraft likely to remain in shade.

In 1976—ironically, the nation's Bicentennial Year—Ferris persuaded

*Above: "Miracle at Kham Duc," Vietnam War era; recreates 1968 C-123 rescue of three airmen, for which Lt. Col. Joe Jackson, the pilot, received the Medal of Honor. Below: "Inspection Party," Cold War era; portrays C-141 airlifter (and curious penguins) after a 1988 landing at McMurdo Station in Antarctica.*



the authorities to eliminate red, white, and blue from the national insignia. Ferris later told the *New York Times*, “If you’re going to camouflage a plane in the first place, it makes sense to avoid conspicuous insignia and unit emblems.” Deception is a key interest. One of Ferris’ patents covers the false canopies painted on the underside of A-10s and Canadian CF-18 fighters, which make it difficult for opponents to know what these airplanes are actually doing in flight.

Ferris’ most famous works feel more emotional than technical, and depict much more than a machine moving through the sky. With fluid brush strokes and detailed precision, he captures motion, and what it feels like to fly.

Ferris has donated 60 paintings to the Air Force Art Program and logged about 300 hours of jet fighter time. The art program joined forces with the Society of Illustrators in New York after the Air Force separated from the Army. The idea was to find artists to donate their time and paintings to the Air Force Art Collection.

“My first painting was 30 inches by 40 inches,” Ferris noted. “It was framed, and it did get into the Air Force Art Collection, but when I [saw it] in the Pentagon it looked like a postage stamp” on the wall. As a result, he went on, “the next painting I did was two feet by eight feet. I figured it would stay in the hallway rather than go into the office. It worked like a charm.”

Before starting each piece, Ferris considers where the painting will hang and how it will be perceived by viewers. The ultimate goal is always the same—recreating the feeling of flight on canvas. “I try to place the viewer so the viewer feels like he or she is in the picture. In other words, you’re in the air with my airplanes,” said Ferris.

The cluttered walls of his studio are barely visible through the rows of Air Force memorabilia: a fragment of a shot-up MiG, tiny blue airplane salt and pepper shakers, helmets, flight suits, and other equipment he’s used in a half-century of flying with the Air Force.

Several thousand reference books fill his shelves and file cabinets. He has 55,000 slides of photos taken during flights with the Air Force and 27 file drawers brimming with detailed information on each mission he has flown.

Though often asked to describe his favorite Air Force memory or to pick the painting he most cherishes, Ferris



**Keith Ferris displays a just completed painting, “Waikiki Sunrise,” modern era; it commemorates the 2006 basing of C-17s at Hickam AFB, Hawaii.**

just laughs and says, “Impossible.” He goes on, “It’s like someone asking you to pick which kid is your favorite.”

#### **Flying No. 4**

Still, he does note a vivid memory of one standout event: His 1963 cross-country flight in an F-100 Super Sabre with the Thunderbirds—the Air Force’s elite aerial demonstration group. On that trip he even flew slot—the No. 4 position in a diamond flying formation—during a practice demonstration.

The opportunity came about when he was representing the Society of Illustrators at a presentation of Air Force art in Los Angeles. “I was looking at a gorgeous painting of the Thunderbirds off the top of the mountains and there was an Air Force officer standing next to me,” Ferris recalled. “This voice said, ‘What do you think of that painting?’

“I said, ‘Well, it’s a wonderful painting, but the way to paint the Thunderbirds is from inside that formation.’

“The airman said, ‘You would do that?’

“I said, ‘Yes, sir.’

“He said, ‘When can you do that?’”

Ferris looked at the stranger wearing the Air Force officer’s uniform and thought, “It had better be before the end of this flying demonstration season, because they are changing from F-100s to F-105s, and they won’t have a two-seat F-105.”

He got his chance about two months

later.

Armed with his \$29 Ricoh fixed lens camera, Ferris reported to Craig AFB, Ala., in December 1963, where he met up with the Thunderbirds narrator. The next day he flew with the Thunderbirds to Las Vegas, arriving at Nellis AFB, Nev., that night.

“I spent a week with this team, and played handball with them, picnicked with their families, and flew in the slot in a practice demonstration,” Ferris said. He even spent the weekend with the team’s engine specialist—whom he still talks to today—changing out the J57 engine so the two-seat airplane would be available to fly during the week.

From the coveted slot position, Ferris was able to record the Thunderbirds from inside the flying formation, as planned.

Though his role in each mission is to fly as an artist, he is not thinking of the next painting while in the air.

“I want to soak up everything I can about what this is like, what the Air Force experience is, ... and [master] the technological things I need to know,” he said. “On the way home I’m thinking of everything I saw and I say, ‘What is the most important thing that everyone involved in this would remember?’ It has to tell their story.” ■

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