

Celestial Eagle: Historic anti-satellite mission remembered

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9/18/2007 - **HOMESTEAD AIR RESERVE BASE, Fla. (AFPN)** -- The F-15 Eagle test pilot settled into the cockpit of the fighter jet at Edwards Air Force Base, Calif., awaiting takeoff with a 2,700 pound, 18-foot long missile mounted to the jet's centerline.

The mission, dubbed the "Celestial Eagle Flight," called for a nearly vertical ascent to 35,000 feet and firing the missile through earth's atmosphere to kill a satellite more than 2,000 miles away at an altitude of 300 miles.

The F-15 Anti-Satellite Combined Test Force had been close to perfecting an air-launched missile capable of destroying orbiting satellites threatening the United States in previous flights, but this clear day in the Mojave Desert was different.

On Sept. 13, 1985, Maj. Wilbert Pearson took off along with other chaser aircraft, ascended to 35,000 feet and fired into the heavens. The rocket separated from the missile after the first stage and propelled a miniature homing vehicle into space on a perfect collision course with the target satellite, marking the only successful satellite kill by an aircraft-launched missile in history.

Fast forward almost 22 years later.

Florida Air National Guard member Staff Sgt. Aaron Hartley, a crew chief with the 125th Fighter Wing's Detachment 1, and an aviation history enthusiast, was tasked with putting together a lithograph for the North American Aerospace Defense Command F-15 Alert Detachment at Homestead Air Reserve Base, Fla. Though based out of Jacksonville, Fla., Sergeant Hartley is assigned full-time to the air defense alert facility here.

The 125th FW is responsible for the maintenance of the NORAD alert facility at Homestead ARB and provides armed F-15 aircraft capable of intercepting, identifying, and if necessary, destroying unknown aircraft that penetrate sovereign U.S. airspace. In the past, this threat has included narcotics trafficking aircraft, unidentified aircraft straying into restricted airspace and Cuban fighter jets.

"I was researching the history of the jets to see which one was the 'coolest' and had the most history, so I contacted historians from the Boeing Company, Edwards AFB, Calif., and the Air Force Historical Research Society at Maxwell AFB, Ala.," Sergeant Hartley said.

Sergeant Hartley learned that tail number 76-0084, currently assigned to the 125th FW, was the same jet Major Pearson had flown during the Celestial Eagle Flight almost 22 years prior.

Sergeant Hartley contacted the pilot, now retired Maj. Gen. Pearson and the vice president of the Lockheed Martin F-35 Integrated Test Force. The two began correspondence about the anti-satellite mission.

General Pearson said that his son, Capt. Todd Pearson, was an active-duty F-15 pilot at Mountain Home AFB, Idaho. And the idea of a Celestial Eagle remembrance flight piloted by Captain Pearson was born.

"We talked about the possibilities of bringing Todd down here to fly, and it really brought back a flood of memories," General Pearson said.

On Sept. 13, General Pearson and his family arrived at the 125th FW alert facility exactly 22 years after the historic flight.

"This is an awesome event and a way for the Air Force to connect from generation to generation," General Pearson said.

This is also another great event occurring during the 60th anniversary of our Air Force, the general said.

In commemoration of the historic day, "Celestial Eagle" was painted on the nose of 76-0084, and the captain's name was painted on the side of the cockpit as a welcoming surprise. Captain Pearson was even wearing the same circular patch on his left shoulder that his father wore on that same day years ago, and they performed the pre-flight walk around the aircraft together.

"I thought it was a great idea," Captain Pearson said regarding the remembrance flight. "I've always been an aviation 'buff,' and I've wanted to fly eagles since I was three because my dad flew them. The flight was a significant event in military aviation history, and I'm glad that I've been able to be a part of this 22 years later."

(F-15A 76-0084 was the 275th F-15 fighter jet to roll off the McDonnell Douglas assembly line in St. Louis, and it flew its maiden flight on Veteran's Day, 1977. Its assignments have included two stints with the 49th Test Fighter Wing at Holloman AFB, N.M.; the 1st Tactical Fighter Wing at Langley AFB, Va.; the 6512th Test Squadron of the Air Force Flight Test Center at Edwards, AFB, Calif.; the Missouri Air National Guard's 131st Fighter Wing in St. Louis; and the Florida Air National Guard's 125th Fighter Wing. No. 76-0084 is scheduled to be retired to the Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Center "Boneyard" at Davis Monthan AFB, Ariz., in 2009 when the 125th FW transitions to the F-15C and D models.)