

Aviating with Bud Evans

Every now and then a special event unexpectedly happens and you want to revel a little in the after glow! That just happened to me and if you are interested in my doing a little bragging, you can read on. Several months ago I received an invitation from the Italian Government to attend the ceremony in Rome for the retirement of their F-104G fighters. I was unaware that any Air Force was still flying the "Star Fighters" but I felt honored that they would invite me to attend the ceremony. I have mentioned in past articles that I was the Chief Test Pilot on the F-104G Joint International Test Force. Fellow V.A.C. member Al Crews (Col. USAF Ret.) was the Deputy Chief Test Pilot of the joint Test Force and he also received an invitation. We were unable to get the same flights to Rome and he arrived several hours ahead of me (with his bags). I was unlucky and after traveling for 30 hours arrived late on the afternoon before the ceremony, without my bags. I was pleasantly surprised to see 17 former German Air Force F-104 pilots and the Italian Test Pilot from the Joint Test Force all waiting for me in the lobby. There was a scheduled dinner and after a quick shower and shave I put on my same clothes and off we went to a large Italian dinner with a larger selection of Italian wines. I got to bed about mid-night and was up at 0600. When I joined the group in the lobby for what was scheduled as an Italian Air Force bus ride to the airfield I was ushered into an Alpha Romeo along with the 2 Retired German Generals: Heinz Birkenbeil and Guenther Rall. Heinz had worked for me on the Category-I and II flight test programs and was the Operations Director of the Category III in Germany. General Rall had been the overall Test Director for the German Air Force and had eventually been Chief of Staff of the German Air Force. (Not to mention the fact that he is the worlds' leading living Fighter Ace).

We were rushed out to an Air Base and flown to the airport where the ceremony and 8 hour continuous international air show was to take place. We were assigned 2 Italian Colonels as our escorts and they did a fantastic job of seeing that we were well taken care of. When we arrived at the air field we were met by the Italian Test Pilot, the former Chief of The Italian Air Force (who was in that position when they received their F-104's), and the President of the Lockheed-Martin Corporation. As it turned out, we were the six VIPs being honored for our part in the success of the F-104G program. The special awards were to be presented by the Prime Minister but his aircraft was delayed so the Commanding General of the Italian Air Force made the presentations so as not to delay the start of the Air Show. The six of us were really given the royal treatment and all of the attending F-104 pilot-guest were also well taken care of during the show. After arriving back at the hotel I had time for another shave and shower and change into clean clothes (as my bag had arrived). We departed for a special Italian dinner arranged for by our Italian Test Pilot. The camaraderie was just the same as a group of Ameri-

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can fighter pilots would have enjoyed and all of the German and Italian pilots spoke only English while Al and I were with them. I was able to talk over old F-104 flying experiences with General Rall and Heinz that occurred during the test program. They reminded me of one flight on which I nearly created an International Incident between NATO and the Russians while flying on the Category III tests at Norvenich Air Base near Cologne, Germany.

I was flying a test mission with the primary purpose of checking the "Terrain Following Mode" of the F-104G NADAAR radar system. I was flying at 200 feet above the ground at an airspeed of 465 knots. My chase plane was an F-104F which did not have the sophisticated weapon system installed. The Litton LN-3 inertial navigation system was comprised of several sets of gyros, which made up the stable platform. Any motion in any direction was transmitted to the gyros and information fed to the guidance system keeping me on the pre-planned flight course. It also controlled the flight director instruments as

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well as most of the weapons delivery systems. The chase pilots primary job was to watch for radio/television towers, tall smokestacks, high-tension power line towers, etc., as my radar was unable to pickup such relatively small obstruction. My course was from Cologne, southwest past Frankfurt then to the east past Munich and back to Norvenich. The flight seemed to be going great and I was occasionally able to glance out of the cockpit and check the landscape.

My course took me over the Black Forrest, which provided very little individual distinctive landmarks. I was confident that my LN-3 system was leading me on the correct course, as I had no desire to come closer the 25 miles from the "Prohibited Zone" which divided East Germany from Western Germany. Flying towards the Austrian Border past Munich would give me plenty of spacing from the "Zone". However East Germany's border was much closer if I strayed to the northeast of my planned course. The terrain became more rolling and at such a high speed at my low altitude I was concentrating



Major Norvin 'Bud' Evans (3rd from left)

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seriously on my “fly up-fly down” signals which my “terrain following” system was directing me to do. I chanced a glance out of the cockpit and was surprised to see a large lake just off to my right. I knew there was no lake on my planned flight path and immediately I checked my LN-3 system failure indicators. All indicating my system was working properly but I knew I was not where my flight plan route was supposed to guide me. Glancing at my old reliable liquid compass I knew we were far off course as it indicated I was flying 45 degrees left of my programmed path. I climbed to 1500 feet above the ground and about that time my chase pilot excitedly called for a hard 180-degree turn. While breaking hard left to head in the opposite direction I observed my Navigation platform failure light blink on and off and then come on steady. This was followed by all of my attitude and flight director instruments wandering aimlessly in strange tumbling motions! The Chase plane took the lead and we returned to Norvenich Air Base and safely landed. In the debriefing we learned that we were inside the buffer zone set up to add some additional space before the “Prohibited Zone” and while traveling at nearly 9 miles per minute we would have penetrated Russian air space in about 3 minutes. We also learned of a new type of partial failure of the system that didn’t turn on the warning light.

Friday night was usually a Happy Hour for the pilots of Jabo 31 the German Air force Squadron selected to conduct the F-104G Category III flight testing for all the Consortium Nations who would be buying that aircraft. The USAF provided hands-on advisory officers for the program. I was the flight test operations advisor and we had the former category II maintenance, weapons system and flight test engineers as our team of advisors. We lived in the Presidential Suite in the Embassy Guest House for the 6 months we were there. Generally, the German pilots would gather at the Happy Hour in the small Officers Club along with the Commanders of the F-104F squadron (Col. Hartman), the F-104G Squadron, Col. Barkhorn and Col. Rall. Occasionally Col. Krupinski, who was to receive the next Squadron of F-104G’s and Gen. Steinhoff, Chief of Staff of the German Air Force would show up for the relaxing evening.

These were the worlds leading fighter aces and they took great delight in teaching me to drink schnapps. You would have little doubt about the fraternity of fighter pilots throughout the world when placed together in a situation of mutual flying interests. I knew these were top fighter aces from the respect the other pilots showed them but there was never any discussion of their combat background when talking with me. They often asked my opinion about various aspects of the F-104’s good and bad qualities as I evaluated them. General Rall is the only one left of the three leading Aces. I don’t know about Krupinski, however he had 197 victories and Gen. Rall had 272.

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Hartman had 352 and Barkhorn was credited with 300. Steinhoff had 175 before he was severely burned while testing the FW-262. I had first met all of them in Palmdale, California after I had recommended that the Martin-Baker seats be removed from the “G” model. The German Government was using the seat as part of the War Reparations agreement made with England. My experience flying the aircraft with the seat installed was that it compromised the pilot’s ability to reach all of the essential switches. I won the argument and the seats were replaced by the Lockheed seat. They never seemed to hold that against me and I had the support of Heinz who had been flying in the Cat-I program with me.

The dinner parties in Rome were just as you would expect of any group of fighter pilots. We ate, drank and talked about flying, women and good wine. General Rall is 86 years old but could keep up with the rest of us walking and enjoying the good Italian wines. He also remembered to kid me about my nearly creating WW-III when my Litton system failure almost led me into East Germany. Besides Al, Gen. Birkeneil, and General Rall, there were 2 of the other Joint Test Force Test Pilots with us. The Italian Test Pilot, Franco Bonazzi who was instrumental in having us invited to the retirement ceremony and Erhard Goerdert who was the 2nd German Test Pilot on the Cat II and III. The Belgium test pilot passed away last year, the Dutch test pilot’s doctor would not let him travel and the Canadian test pilot had a prior commitment. One of the former German F-104G pilots immigrated to the U.S. and flew for American Airlines. He has also been flying the 2 F-104’s that appear at air shows around the U.S. and Canada. They were restored in St. Petersburg, Florida several years ago. He has also flown the first flight on the FW-262 that is being manufactured in Everett, Washington. I discussed the possibility of bringing it to our air show next year and he was receptive to the idea.



German ace Gunther Rall, Bud, and Heinz Birkenbeil at Pacifico De Mar Air Base, May 2004