

Planeless AIR BASE

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Col Robert R. Rowland, a World War II ace and commander of the 21st Wing, hopes to have tactical aircraft back soon.

IN THE AIR FORCE, an outfit deprived of its planes is like a bird without wings. It's a little lost and lonely and even a bit confused.

Two jet-equipped fighter wings recently assigned to 12th Air Force are undergoing just such an experience at new North Atlantic Treaty Organization bases in France. But they are struggling to make the best of things.

Pending completion of their new stations at Chambley and Etain, the tactical elements of the 21st and 388th Fighter-Bomber Wings have been deployed to other bases in France and Germany.

While the F86 Squadrons are right to work on the job of aiding in the defense of Western Europe, the main bodies of the wings are saddled with the grueling and far less glamorous task of readying the bases for the return of the planes.

Sabres of the 388th are flying out of Hahn, Spangdahlem and Bitburg in Germany, while the 21st's F86s are stationed at Toul-Rosiere and Chateauroux Air Bases in France.

"We are shooting to start returning our squadrons to Etain within three months," said Col Harold J. Whiteman, who recently succeeded Brig Gen James F. Whisenand, as commander of the 388th Wing. "All the officers and airmen are doing everything they can to hasten the return of the aircraft, but it's a tough job."

Whiteman took over the 388th when Whisenand moved to 3d Air Force in England to replace Brig Gen John D. Stevenson as Commanding Officer of 49th Air Div. Stevenson returned to the States.

The surface echelons of both the 388th and the 21st Wings arrived at La Pallice, France, December 12, on the USNS Gen Leroy Eltinge. The jet squadrons flew their F86s across the ocean.

"We got in here shortly before Christmas and conditions were a far cry from the best," an Etain airman said. "The weather was rotten and we've had mud up to our knees since we got here."

"On Christmas Eve the lights blew and that just about did it. There weren't many letters to Santa, but there were plenty written to Congress by candlelight that night...."

At nearby Chambley Air Base, Col Rob-

ert R. Rowland, commander of the 21st Wing, said "We expect to have our first tactical unit—the 72d Fighter-Bomber Squadron, now at Chateauroux—back here and operating within about a month. The 416th and 531st Squadrons at Toul-Rosiere will follow in short order."

Rowland, a World War II ace credited with downing eight Jap planes in the Southwest Pacific, explained that the big holdup at Chambley is the lack of adequate navigational aids and aircraft control facilities.

"Our BOQs and airmen's billets are complete and we're about ready to go. What we lack most at present are recreation facilities and housing. We have to rely on a small theater and Special Service tours to take up the slack."

Rowland, who attained the rank of colonel during the war at the age of 26, led the fighter echelon of the 21st across the ocean from the U.S. Among his decorations are the Silver Star, the Legion of Merit, the Distinguished Flying Cross with two Oak Leaf Clusters and the Air Medal with five clusters.

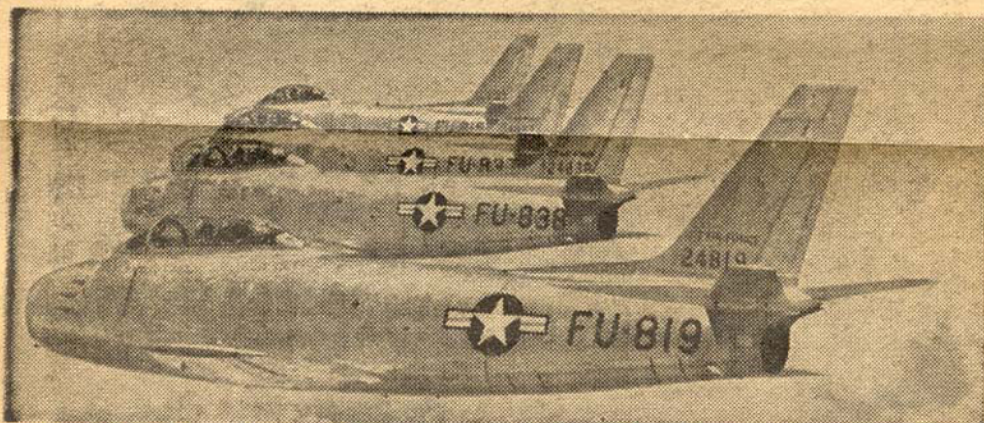
Whiteman, former deputy commander of the 388th, commanded the surface echelons of both the wings on the voyage across the ocean.

The 37-year-old colonel hails from San Antonio, Texas, and has been in the service 17 years. A command pilot, he has chalked up more than 4,000 hours in the air, including jet time.

"The basic units at Etain are completed now," Whiteman pointed out. "Our runways and taxiways are all set. Our barracks, hangars and shops are all in. So it shouldn't be too long before we start full operations here."

"None of our dependents are here yet, but they should start arriving soon. We've been authorized 235 trailers and hope to get the first 50 ready by the time they arrive. Housing is tough here—a 12th Air Force survey showed there were only 50-60 apartments available within a 25-mile radius of the base...."

"By next fall we should have many of our problems solved," Whiteman said. "It's the primary concern of everyone at Etain to get the wing together again and get the planes back on the base."



Sabres of the 388th Fighter-Bomber Wing: They have been deployed to other AF bases.