

# **BIRKENFELD AIR BASE**

**1948 - 1969**

## **BACKGROUND**

**by Jackie D. King**

The military facility we know as Birkenfeld Air Base was first established by the German Army (Wehrmacht) as an anti-aircraft artillery battery (AAA) in 1938. German Army soldiers of the 4th Anti--Aircraft Battery, Regiment 22 (Berlin) arrived in Birkenfeld/Nahe, located in the Hunsruck Mountains, during June, 1938. The unit was comprised of approximately 200 men and 50 vehicles. In 1939, the AAA Battery was redesignated the 5th Battery, 32nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment. It has been stated that the Base also served as a German Army hospital before the end of World War II, but this cannot be confirmed and is openly disputed by some Birkenfelders. The Base facility is located on the outskirts of the town of Birkenfeld/Nahe, Rheinland-Pfalz, which was in the French Zone of occupied Germany after World War II.

It was controlled by a French Army garrison and French troops were billeted there. The Base, and several Tech Site locations, was turned over to advance elements of the 602nd Tac Con Sq (TCS) during the summer and fall of 1948. The 602nd TCS was redesignated the 602nd AC&W Sqdn on 23 Nov 1948, just before the unit moved from Darmstadt Military Post, Germany to Birkenfeld/Nahe.

When the main body of 602nd troops and equipment arrived from Darmstadt on 8 Dec 1948, construction of temporary quarters (Quonset Huts) was undertaken to house the troops for the winter. At least twelve (12) Quonset huts were initially constructed for quarters or for administrative offices. One of the major problems during the first harsh winter was an ever-present sea of mud that hindered all activity. An aggressive base-building program during the next five years led to the permanent structures and base-layout that was so familiar to post-1953 assignees.

Several of the pre-existing temporary structures were razed once the base construction program was underway. Ten of the Quonset huts, first used as dormitories during the winter of 1948, then later, as warehouses/hobby shops/recreation buildings, survived for the next 20 years (until 1968), when they were finally torn down and replaced by roomier, pre-fab structures called "Butler" buildings.

The 602nd was the first American unit to move into the French Zone and, because they came to build, were soon welcomed with open arms by the townspeople, and Birkenfeld has remained an "Air Force town" since that time. Like all Germany, Birkenfeld and surrounding areas still faced a war-torn economy and were desperate for work. They had more than enough of the imperious demands of the French military authorities by the time the Americans arrived in 1948. The cutting and shipment to France of millions of board feet of Germany's timber, without compensation and under the French Army guise of "military reparations", is still spoken of today in the Birkenfeld area and throughout Rheinland-Pfalz.

During this time, young Germans volunteered to help re-plant entire forests that had been clear-cut and shipped to France; and, today, they proudly point to the lush green forests on the hills surrounding Birkenfeld that they helped re-plant as youths.

The Americans hired the local Germans, paid them well, and also paid local shopkeepers and businesses for what was needed to build Birkenfeld Air Base. Of course, the U.S. troops were viewed as intruders by almost all members of the French Army, primarily because American PFCs earned more pay in a week than most French NCOs earned all month and very quickly out-spent, out-partied, and out-maneuvered their French counterparts at work and at play. It was rumored (probably propagated by a disgruntled, out-maneuvered French NCO, and most likely without valid foundation) that many of the GIs, who were paid in Military Payment Certificates ("Script"), supplemented their military income by bartering their highly valued American cigarettes (and other commissary/BX items) with the Germans or even by selling the items outright! Of course, our leaders were all men of vision, and to their credit, ignored these anti-American aspersions. However, no GI was ever known to give away their ration stamps even to friends! It was also amazing to observe payday lines at the BX filled with GI's who otherwise never smoked, purchasing their full months rations of cigarettes as they publicly "proved" their smoking habit by ostentatiously puffing on their one cigarette of the month!

## **602nd AC & W SQDN**

**(1948-1955)**

The Squadron mission was to provide early warning radar coverage to the limits of its equipment and to provide navigational aid to all allied aircraft flying over the Occupied Zones of Europe (Call sign: "Cornbeef"). In addition to the installation of search (AN/CPS- 1) and Height-Finder (AN/CPS-4) radar on the Tech Site at Erbeskopf (located about 10 miles from the Base), the Squadron also established, manned and operated several Radio Relay Sites (Call sign:"03 Zulu") and Direction Finding (*D/F*) Sites (Call sign: "Cornbeef *D/F*") within a 100 mile radius of Birkenfeld. Combed *D/F* ultimately was designated a Net Control Station (Master) and directed the "fix" efforts of 5 other Sites in the Northern Europe UHF *D/F* Net. Soon a MARS Station was also operational (Call sign DL4HQ) which permitted tele phone calls to be "patched" back to the States to sweethearts, families, and friends. By 1954, with the assignment of ever more high-performance jet aircraft in Europe, a high altitude Air Traffic Control Center was set up and operated on Erbeskopf (Call sign: "Combed Control") — Note: This conventionally operated ATC (non-Radar) facility was later renamed Rein Control and continued to grow through the mid-1960s, gaining enrooted radar capability. The plans to provide radar approach-control services for aircraft landing at Ramstein, Sembach, Landstuhl, Hahn, Bitburg and Spangdahlem Air Bases did not come to full realization due to the technical difficulties involved. The Air Traffic control function was finally taken over by the Germans and relocated to Frankfurt Air Traffic Control Center in the late 1960s.

Even with the sense of urgency involved in establishing a viable and efficient organization at Birkenfeld during the "early years", time was taken to insure that "troop" morale remained high. Team sports were emphasized and gala Squadron parties were executed, both on and off Base, to celebrate victories on the field, the completion of major construction projects (like the EM Club), or for any good and valid reason! Before the completion of the EM Club, Squadron "blasts" were held in the dining hall or downtown at the Turnhalle!

Birkenfeld Air Base soon gained a formidable reputation for its athletic prowess in baseball, basketball, touch football, tackle football and other sports. Another morale "booster" was the liberal pass policy always in effect to permit hardworking troops to visit and get acquainted with the friendly citizens of Birkenfeld.

In early 1955, the decision was made to move the 602nd to Giebelstadt, Germany, and on 5 Dec 1955, control of Birkenfeld Air Base passed to the 619th TACONRON, which had recently deployed to Birkenfeld from France.

## **619th TACONRON**

**(1955-1958)**

The previously deactivated 619th Tactical Control Squadron, which had operated in the Philippines after WW II and during Korea, was reactivated at Spangdahlem Air Base, Germany in November, 1953. The unit was moved to Toul Rosieres, France in July, 1954. The 619th TACONRON, led by Maj. Edward J. Komyati, deployed to Birkenfeld in November, 1955 and assumed control of the Base on 5 Dec 1955. When reassigned on 24 June 1956, Maj. Komyati was replaced by Major Lowell D. Sollenberger as Commander.

The mission of the 619th was unique in 12th Air Force. This was a fully operational, mobile Tactical Control Squadron, designed to deploy on short notice, set up, man and operate an Air Control Center wherever needed. At Birkenfeld, the Squadron mission was reduced to that of an Alternate Air Control Center and other Base Support functions. The air traffic control function of Cornbeef Control's Upper Area Control Center on Erbeskopf, providing positive IFR control to military and civilian aircraft flying above 20,000 feet, was also assumed, but with the addition of expanded ATC services and the assignment of German Air Force and BFS (ie German FAA) Controllers, this activity would ultimately be passed to the 7100th Support Wing, Wiesbaden AB, Germany, and Rhein Control would draw Base Support from Birkenfeld Air Base.

Birkenfeld still retained its reputation as a giant on the playing fields — especially with the assignment of the Tactical Control Wing's (TCW) football team, the Taconeers. Aspiring football players from throughout

the wing were sent to Birkenfeld, assigned to the Alternate ACC, then trained long and hard to make the football team. The Taconeers finished third in the European Conference in 1956 and then won the USAFE Football Championship in 1957, and a rowdy time was had by all!

The decision to eliminate the alternate ACC spelled doom for the 619th's existence as a unit. Deactivation began on 28 Apr 1958 with the receipt of the following message from Wing Hqs. (Message DOAC 0212): "Your request to cease operation of the Alternate ACC effective immediately is approved." As many airmen as could be used in other Squadrons were dispersed throughout the Wing. The rest (over 100 officers and men) were placed on orders to activate the 7424th Support Squadron at Birkenfeld Air Base on 1 July 1958. 71

## **7424th SUPRON**

**(1958-1962)**

The 7424th Support Sqdn not only continued base housekeeping and maintenance responsibilities but also supported a growing list of tenant organizations that were assigned to Birkenfeld Air Base

- 7030th ABW, Det#1 (T/Sgt John R. Nel-German Air Force ATC Detachment (Billeted in the NCO/Airman's Dormitories, 1959-62)
- 7100th Support Group
- Rhein Control (OIC: Maj George W. Mannussier
- O/L #1, 807th TCS (1958)
- O/L #3, Det 2, 31 Weather Sq (Capt Richard A. Rinaldi 1964-67)
- O/L #10, 603rd AC & W Sq (OIC: Capt August F. Warden)
- O/L#11, 615th AC & W Sq (Capt Wilford T. Root 1955-58; CWO Joseph R. Feagans, 1958-59)
- Det#1, 17th AF (Col. James D. Babb, 1968-6)
- 1233rd AACCS Sq, (CO: Capt Steve J. Hrabovsk Jan-Aug, 1959); (CO: Major Earl Straub, Aug 1959-Sept. 1960)
- 2133rd AFCS Sq, (CO: Major Doyle K. Chapman 1959-62; Major Lewis J. Colburn, 1962-64)
- 2184 AFCS Sq. Det#1(I/LT Richard H. Holem

Other tenant organizations may have been assigned, but the unit designations are unknown.

On 1 July 1962, control of Birkenfeld Air Base was passed to the 615th AC & W Squadron when it moved from Pruem, Germany to Birkenfeld. The men and equipment of the 7424th SUPPRON were absorbed by the 615th and the facility was known as Birkenfeld Air Station from that time on.

## **615th AC & W SQDN**

**(1962-1969)**

The arrival of the 615th AC & W Squadron commenced a decade long buildup of Birkenfeld Air Station and related facilities. The Rhein Upper Area Control Center on Erbeskopf (previously Cornbeef Control) was operated by US Air Force, German Air Force and BFS (German FAA) Air Traffic controllers until 1968 when that operation was transferred to Frankfurt ARTCC. The 412L Air Weapons Control System was installed at Borfink and the operational "Bunker" facility (Call sign: "Waterhole") became a high profile operation, contributing to the 615th's growth into 17th Air Force's largest aircraft control and warning squadron. Constant training of assigned personnel and NATO counterparts was the order of the day. The

(SPATS) members to insure complete compatibility with other NATO-operated systems was never-ending, as was the steady stream of high-level defense and civilian dignitaries whose primary goal in life seemed to be an official visit to and “briefing” from the men of Allied Sector III, Sector Operations Center at the Borfink Bunker.

The cost-cutting days of the Nixon years brought the final sharp thrust to our hearts —BIRKENFELD TO CLOSE! announced in “The American” (Base newspaper) on August 29, 1969. To paraphrase a young Sergeant who lived through the sad ordeal: “Oktoberfest was held at the Falcon club and Delft Heineken’s beer mugs were given to all, commemorating what good customers we were.

December was the end. We moved all personnel out during the first week and removed all remaining assets the second week. The station was sealed until December 31, 1969 when it was officially turned over to the Germans for an army transport unit. All was taken away from us—our first class dorms; our outstanding dining facility where our super-chef, SMSgt Tomasek, provided us with gourmet meals; our country club (Falcon Club) -rated the best in Europe; our library located in the dormitory; our own Ballpark and picnic grounds just across the street; our new Bowling Alleys, Theater, Snack Bar and Health Spa (Gym), not to mention our well equipped hobby shops. And they took “our town” from us, too (we could walk to town in five minutes from the Base) — and sent us 5 KM down the road to run-down, mothballed, “ground-pounder” ex-hospital at Neubrucke that just couldn’t do! And once there, the SOBs tried to feed us canned sausage, powdered eggs and powdered milk for breakfast! Our commander, Colonel Henly M. Ogburn, took action to obtain fresh eggs, milk, sausage and bacon for his troops from Hahn Air Base, and then posted a guard at the dining hall to insure only Air Force members were served these final remnants of what had been lost.”

Birkenfeld Air Station was turned over to the German Army (Bundeswehr) in 1969; was renamed the “Oldenburg Kaserne”; and, for the next ten years was used as a Bundeswehr facility. It became an AFCENT Support Group facility in 1979 and then a NATO base in 1983, both in support of the Borfink Bunker. This period saw the personnel of many NATO countries (including more USAF blue-suiters) assigned there until it was finally closed in 1994 and returned for administrative management to the town of Birkenfeld. It now appears that the Base property will be used to permit the expansion of the Birkenfeld Hospital with whom the Base shares a common property line.