

Last Mission

Every fighter pilot knows someday there will be a last flight. Even so, it is rare that the pilot is able to share the moment with his family. The last missions flown by three Fresno pilots August 6, 1994, were very special.

Lt. Col. Joseph Leadingham, 194th Fighter Squadron Flight Commander, led the two-ship flight of F-16s. On his wing was Lt. Col. Raymond M. Bluhm, 144th Fighter Squadron Flight Commander. In the back seat of Bluhm's F-16 rode his friend Lt. Col. Randy L. Bushore, 144th Fighter Wing Intelligence Staff Officer. It was the last mission for all three men. Bushore, a former T-33, F-106, and F-4 pilot, never got his official final mission in the Phantom. Bluhm knew that, and invited his friend along. All three men had flown in the Air Force and the Air Guard together.

Each August, the 144th Fighter Wing and the Air Force Reserve come together to demonstrate the Total Force concept to the Fresno, Calif., community. This year, a Reserve KC-10A Extender from March AFB, Calif., flew four missions, refueling F-16 Fighting Falcons from Fresno ANGB.

Bluhm's father, retired Air Force Lt. Col. Floyd Bluhm, and Bushore's wife Susan, were on-board the KC-10A that Saturday. The elder Bluhm is a former B-17 Flying Fortress maintenance officer. This was his and Mrs. Bushore's first flight in a KC-10A. They joined the boomer to share in the excitement as Bluhm brought his agile little F-16 smoothly behind the huge tanker to take on his final load of fuel. Set against the backdrop of Death Valley National Monument 24,000 feet below, the Bluhm's and Bushore's

shared an experience most only dream about.

The KC-10A returned to Fresno first, allowing Mrs. Bushore and Lt. Col. Bluhm to join almost two dozen friends and relatives waiting for the F-16s. Bluhm's F-16 landed first, but Leadingham made so many passes at the runway the other pilots watching his performance began to think he'd stay up there until he was shot down.



Lt. Col. Joseph Leadingham (above), Lt. Col. Raymond M. Bluhm (left) and Lt. Col. Randy L. Bushore (below) pose with their families following their last F-16 mission together in August. (Official USAF photos by SSgt. Cynthia N. Lashley)

The last part of the final mission tradition calls for hosing down the pilots by members of the crash crew. In this case, holding the crash truck hose for the dousing of Bushore was his wife Susan, along with a third member of the family, Bushore's son A1C Roger L. Bushore, a jet engine mechanic with the 144th Consolidated Aircraft Maintenance Squadron. Bluhm's father Floyd and wife Martha, and Leadingham's wife Beverly each made sure their pilots got a well-deserved, very wet send-off.

Memories don't get any better than this.

