

The Bald Eagles

The 144th Fighter Wing and its subordinate unit, the 194th Fighter Squadron of the California Air National Guard, began operations in 1948 at the Oakland, California Airport. The unit was staffed by volunteer WWII veteran officers and enlisted men consisting of pilots, aircraft maintenance, and various other personnel assigned to departments in the unit. Not long after its inception the 144th moved south only a few miles to the Hayward, CA Municipal Airport. Flying the F-51D Mustang, the unit was initially designated the 144th Fighter Wing, and 194th Fighter Bomber Squadron, respectively.

A few years later the Korean War was underway and the F-51D was in high demand as a counterinsurgency fighter aircraft. The 194th lost its D-model aircraft when active-duty forces acquired them for use in the Korean War effort and the 194th received brand new, zero-time F-51H Mustangs. Additionally, the Wing and the Squadron integrated into the Air Defense Command and redesignated the 144th Fighter Interceptor Wing and the 194th Fighter Interceptor Squadron.



F-51Ds of the 194th Fighter Squadron



F-51H of the 194th Fighter Interceptor Squadron



The unit flew into the jet age in 1955 when the unit was designated to convert to North American F-86A Sabres. Because of the short runways at Hayward and with no practical way to extend them at the Hayward facility, a decision was made to move the fighter operation from Hayward to the Fresno Air Terminal, California, which had longer runways and had the real estate available to extend them.



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The 144th FIW moved its operation from Hayward to the Fresno Air Terminal in the summer of 1955. An entire new facility was under construction at the Fresno Airport including a new hangar, tarmac, and various other structures to house other necessary support facilities at the new base.

The 194th FIS, now flying the F-86A from its base at the Fresno Air Terminal created their own Aerial Demonstration team naming them the *BALD EAGLES*. The team leader was Major Milton Graham, a WWII P-38 pilot. The wingmen were Captains Art Porter and Ray Foster. Slot pilot was Captain James Kilpatrick. A fifth member was Lieutenant Darrel Cline, whose job was to take a single F-86A up and keep the area over the airport clear of any unwanted aircraft by chasing them away.

The four-plane team aircraft were modified to “smoke” and performed many of the familiar maneuvers performed by present day aerial demonstration teams. Flying diamond formation, the Bald Eagles did barrel rolls, loops, as well as the bomb burst. With only four aircraft the bomb burst did not include a solo aircraft coming up behind the “burst” and flying straight up vertically while rapidly rolling the aircraft as practiced by both the Thunderbirds and the Blue Angels, however it was impressive! The Bald Eagles were a popular crowd pleaser in the mid-1950s throughout the greater San Joaquin Valley area and performed several aerial demonstrations.

An Aerial Demonstration meet was held at Nellis AFB, Nevada at that time with several USAF and ANG teams participating, including Fresno's *BALD EAGLES*. The competition was intense, with all teams trying to "outfly" their respective opponents. The *Bald Eagles'* Lead Pilot, Maj Graham, briefed his boys to "fly smoother and tighter" than normal to impress the judges. Captain Jim Kilpatrick, the Slot Pilot, carried out his leader's instructions to a "T". Upon landing and taxiing by the crowd and judges, the parked and shut down. As the team assembled on the tarmac near their F-86s they noticed the top of the plexiglass canopy on aircraft #4 was blackened and warped from the hot jet engine exhaust of the Leader's airplane due to Kilpatrick tucking his jet in so close and tight directly behind and underneath his leader.

A little before the 144th transitioned to the "newer" F-86L in 1962, the Department of Defense decided the expense of having numerous aerial demonstration teams spread out around the planet both in the USAF/ANG and the Navy was excessive. The USAF made the *THUNDERBIRDS* their official Aerial Demonstration Team, the Navy did the same with the *BLUE ANGELS*. An end of an era came to a close.

As a youngster I vividly recall seeing the *Bald Eagles* perform in the skies over the Fresno Airport. Luckily, one of the aircraft now serving as gate guard is "*OLE LEROY*," the aircraft Maj Milt Graham flew as Flight Lead for the *Bald Eagles Aerial Demonstration Team* of the 194th Fighter Interceptor Squadron, 144th Fighter Interceptor Wing.

As a sidenote, several USAF and ANG flying units around the country had their own aerial demonstration teams. The Colorado ANG had the MINUTEMEN who initially flew the T-33 Shooting Star and later the F-86 Sabre; the USAFE SKY BLAZERS flew the F-84G, F-86F, and the F-100C.



F-84Gs of the SKY BLAZERS



SKY BLAZER F-86s



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F-86A of the 144th FW now performing gate guard duty

