

The Language of the Fourth Fighter Group

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The Fourth was unique in the annals of American military history on several levels. Among other things, it was the only US military organization constituted on foreign soil. The three squadrons of the Fourth began life as Eagle Squadrons in the Royal Air Force. American pilots flying RAF aircraft, led by RAF officers, flying from an RAF airdromes. They also ate traditional RAF mess rations and had their aircraft maintained by an RAF ground echelon.

Many Eagle pilots, between training in Canada and operations in England had been in the RAF for nearly two years before the three squadrons were transferred as a unit into the US Army Air Forces on 29 September 1942. Until Fourth was reequipped with Thunderbolts in March 1943, they continued to fly Spitfires. RAF maintainers remained until February when USAAF service units took over. And RAF rations remained on base until February as well. The Yanks of the Fourth looked forward to having a breakfast of eggs and toast instead of Kippered Herring and beans.

Being so steeped in RAF tradition, it was difficult for the old hands to shake RAF terminology as they were integrated into USAAF operations. And, because of a genuine fondness for their adopted armed service, the RAF, they clung to many English terms and idiom.

For example, on no other air base in the European Theater would a pilot refer to his aircraft as a “kite.” Only at Debden. It took months before some pilots stopped referring to their new American Crew Chiefs as a “fitter.”

In the Fourth Fighter Group Association web site are copies of after action reports and claims for enemy aircraft destroyed. Reading them is made easier by knowing some of the language of the group. Rather than being clinical statements, they read in the vernacular of the time and are very conversational.

Squadron Numbers

The most vivid example of retaining the British ways is how the number designation of each squadron was pronounced. The Eagle Squadrons were 71, 121 and 133 Squadrons. In the RAF two number units were pronounced the same as in American practice but with the word “number” leading the squadron, thus: “Number Seventy One Squadron.”

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But three numeral units were pronounced by saying each individual number in the grouping. Thus 121 Squadron was pronounced “One Two One Squadron.” The three Eagle Squadrons became the 334, 335 and 336 fighter squadrons in the USAAF. But instead of pronouncing the number in the American English style of “three hundred thirty fourth squadron,” members of the Fourth continued the British practice. Thus the three Fourth Fighter Group squadrons were pronounced: “Three Three Four,” “Three Three Five,” and “Three Three Six” squadrons.

At reunions sixty years on, Debden veterans still refer to the squadrons this way. Visit any other American Air Force reunion or active base and you will never hear three digit unit numbers pronounced in the British style. This is something completely unique to the Fourth Fighter Group.

Screw Driver By the Tire

There were dozens of AAF airfields in East Anglia by the war’s end. But on only one could you find American Crew Chief’s using the same method as their RAF counterparts to indicate that a kite was fueled, armed and ready to go – a screw driver stuck in the ground next to the left front landing gear. Elsewhere on this web site are photos of aircraft in dispersals ready to fly. On some of them you can spot the screw driver. A small thing, but a unique carryover to the Fourth from the Eagle Squadron days.

Basic Gibberish

Capt. Grover C. Hall concludes his book “Mr. Tettley’s Tenants,” with a section called Basic Gibberish. It is an instructive glossary of the many idioms that remained part of the Fourth vocabulary long after the transition to the AAF. As replacement pilots arrived they adopted the RAF jargon as well. Every military unit likes to feel it is unique in some way. The Fourth clung to its RAF roots throughout the war. Non-Eagle pilots and the ground echelon adopted much of the language partially to be unique and partially as a tribute to the origins the Group.

Below is an assortment of Basic Gibberish that remained with the Fourth for the duration.

Airdrome: Air field, air base.

Auger: Plane crash. “The engine quite on takeoff and her augered in.”

Baby: Belly Tank

Bag: Parachute.

Beat up: Low level pass at high speed. Buzz job in American parlance.

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Biscuits: Cakes served at tea time.

Bounce: To attack an opposing flight of aircraft from a superior position.

Bowser: Truck used to fuel aircraft.

Browned-off: Annoyed, vexed. Also *cheesed off and brassed off*.

Bumf or Bumph: Paperwork. Pending paperwork goes in the Bum file. Sometimes Bum-Fudder.

Carriage: Passenger car on a train.

Caterpillar Club: For pilots who have bailed out while on a mission. Reference to the source of the silk used in making parachutes.

Character: Pronoun that takes in anything from and ME 109 to a hotel doorman.

Cheers: Hello, good-bye, a toast and general salutation.

Circus: Fighter escort of short range bomber mission.

Clobbered: To be attacked, "I'm being clobbered." To attack, "I really clobbered him."

Clobber College: Operational Training within the group to help new pilots adapt to Fourth Group tactics.

Dispersal: Reference not to where aircraft are parked but the hut on the fringe of the field where pilots don flying togs, report for interrogation after missions and relax between shows.

Do: An event. Generally a special event like a party, wedding or dance. Or a mission. "Fighter Command is planning a big do for next week."

Dog Fight: Although common to both RAF and USAAF it was the only term used to describe air to air action with the enemy. The term "fur ball" has become common among WWII on-line combat enthusiasts and appears occasionally in aviation history publications. It's origins postdate WW II by many years and it's use is incorrect in a WW II environamnt.

Duff: Something that is wrong or inaccurate.

Dust Bin: Trash can.

Eager: A courageous German pilot is *eager*. A pilot who wants to make every mission is *eager* or *keen*.

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Finger: Typically a thumbs up from the fitter telling the pilot that he is clear to roll out of the parking area. Also a heads up, as in, "Fingers out gents," to indicate an officer is approaching or to pay attention.

Fitter: Engine mechanic. Also a Crew Chief.

Flat-out: Maximum speed, *full bore*.

Flub-the-dub: Miss the boat, mess things up.

Gaggle: A cluster or pack of aircraft. Could range from 10, 20 or 50.

Gen: Information; the dope.

Gong: A suspension ribbon military award. So called because it resembles an oriental gong. Formations when awards are presented are called "Gong Parades." Truly unique to the Fourth Fighter Group.

Gremlin: The source of untraceable mechanical problems. Certain kites appeared to have more than their share of gremlins.

Had it: Finished, washed up. If you miss a train, your companion may say, "Well, we've had that one." Also to run out of something. When ordering a menu item that has run out, the reply from the waitress may be, "Sorry sir, you've had it."

IO: Intelligence Officer. Also known as Omnipotents.

Joy: Success but frequently associated with negative results. "We searched for the downed pilot all afternoon, but no joy."

Kit: Belongings. A "kit bag" as opposed to a duffel bag in the American military.

Kite: An aircraft. Equivalent to "ship" in the USAAF.

Let Down: Reduce altitude gradually.

Luftberry: A defensive maneuver, a hand me down from WWI. When confronted with a numerically superior enemy force, a squadron would form into a tight circle. Thus an attacker trying to break the ring would expose himself to fire from the circling Luftberry.

Narvik: One of the dispersal huts was named Narvik by the RAF, presumably after the Norwegian battle there in 1940 between the Germans and the Britons.

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Nissen Hut: A building made of corrugated steel sheets shaped into half-circles 16, 24 or 30 feet across. Invented by Canadian Major Peter Norman Nissen of the Royal Engineers in 1916. End walls in England were typically brick, but could be framed of wood. Frequently confused with the Quonset Hut supplied to the American military in WWII and first manufactured in Quonset, Rhode Island. The original Nissen hut that housed the enlisted bar, "The Belly Tank" was removed from Debden in 1968 and reassembled at the Air Force Museum in Dayton, Ohio.

No Joy: Expression of no enemy contact. A missed opportunity or to come up empty during a search.

Pancake: To land. In American parlance it means to land with the wheels up.

Perri Track: Short for Perimeter Track, or taxiway that circles the field and common in the layout of RAF airfields.

Petrol: Gasoline or aviation fuel.

Poon: A British Pound Sterling.

Prang: To wreck an aircraft.

Press: To start engines. Or "Press Time."

Queue: A line; also *queueing up* and *queue up*.

Ramrod: Bomber raid escorted by fighters.

Recco: Reconnaissance; e.g., a *weather recco* mission. As opposed to the American term "recon."

Rhubarb: Low level strafing mission.

Rigger: Aviation airframe mechanic.

Rodeo: Fighter sweep into enemy territory without bombers.

Shake: Unnerve; disconcert; rattle; bemuse.

Show: A combat mission; not used for *movie*, that being a *cinema*. "The show today is a withdrawal support from Berlin."

Spanner: A wrench.

Squirt: Machine gun burst.

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Tit: Button on stick to fire guns.

Torch: A flashlight.

Types: A generally condescending reference proceeded by a descriptive noun.
“Those admin-types just don’t understand mission planning.”

Undercarriage: Landing gear.

White Diamond: An egg in war time England.

Wizard: The best, excellent, the berries, the cat’s ankle.

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Adapted and expanded from “Mr. Tettley’s Tenants,” by Capt. Grover C. Hall, Jr. Baynard Press, 1944. Out of print.

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