
NUGGETS OF HISTORY

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ILLINOIS MILITARY HALL OF FAME



Major General Ascani,
Jet Ace



Rear Admiral Dufek,
Polar Expert



General Kuter,
Rockford's Four-Star General



Colonel Hassell,
Pioneer Aviator



Brigadier General Stocking,
Air Force Commander

THE ROCKFORD FIVE

Photos courtesy Rockford Register-Star: Ascani, Dufek; Hall of Fame: Stocking, Kuter;
Mary Lyons: Hassell.

FROM AN EDITOR'S DESK

In this issue, we're pleased to present biographical sketches of five Rockford men with distinguished aviation careers. On May 17, 1997, they will join 28 other flyers--27 men and one woman--in the Military Aviation Hall of Fame of Illinois. In addition, two other Illinois men will be inducted.

Two area men--Herbert C. Healey of the Rockford World War II Combat Flyers and Paul Holland Jr., a Hall of Fame member from nearby Oregon-- spearheaded local induction arrangements. The Rockford Area Convention and Visitors Bureau assisted. Previous such ceremonies have been held in Rantoul at the former Chanute Air Force Base. At the Clock Tower Resort, preceding the ceremony, cocktails at 11 a.m. will be followed by a luncheon at noon. Inquiries may be directed to the RACVB, 963/8111.



Peggy Jensen, Editor



ROCKFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Sunday, June 1, 1:30 - 4:30 p.m.--Wempletown Tour

Presentations at 1:30, 2:30 and 3:30 at Burritt Township Hall and Burritt Community Church, both on Trask Bridge Road. Hear about Trask Bridge picnics, once billed as the world's largest farm picnics; and the unique history of the community church dating from the 1860s. Costumed interpreters will be at the North Burritt Cemetery, on Cemetery Road, to greet visitors throughout the afternoon. Refreshments at the church. No admission charged, but donations will be appreciated.

Annual Bus Tour--Saturday, Sept. 20

Destination: Dubuque, Iowa, for a tour of four elegant historic mansions: Ham House, Redstone Inn, Ryan House and Mandolin Inn plus luncheon. Choose either hot chicken salad or roast pork ala orange with fruited rice. Depart 7:30 a.m on Peoria-Rockford Bus from Highcrest Centre. Cost: \$35. Send menu selection with check to Rockford Historical Society, 6799 Guilford Rd., Rockford, IL 61107. Deadline Sept. 10.

MILITARY HALL OF FAME OF ILLINOIS

Armed Forces Day--May 17, 1997--marks the induction of five Rockford natives into the Military Aviation Hall of Fame of Illinois. Usually held at Hall of Fame quarters on former Chanute Air Force Base, Rantoul, this particular ceremony took place in Rockford at the Clock Tower Resort. Dr. Milton Carlson, a founder and director of the Hall of Fame, conducted the local event.

The Rockford inductees are Major General Fred J. Ascani, Admiral George J. Dufek, Colonel Bert R.J. "Fish" Hassell, General Laurence S. Kuter and Brigadier General Lewis Stocking.

MAJOR GENERAL FRED J. ASCANI



By virtue of a world speed record set in August 1951 at air races in Detroit, the then 32-year-old Ascani received acclaim as the U. S. Air Force's top jet ace. Flying an F-86 SabreJet Fighter--equipped with a GE J-47 engine--over a 62-mile closed circuit, he flew a record 635.4 miles per hour. He won not only the MacKay and Thompson trophies, but also received the de La Vaulx medal awarded by the international rule-making body, the Federation Aeronautique International.

Rockford citizens honored Ascani at a community banquet in February 1952 following his world-record achievement. Arriving at the Rockford Airport in a T-33 jet trainer, he streaked out of the southeast, rolled the plane over the field, then sped into the distance before returning for a smooth landing.

During his early years Ascani lived with his parents, Gino and Maria Ascani, and his sister Clara at 790 N. First Street. Early on, he displayed a penchant for flying--creating model planes and expressing a desire, "All I ever wanted to be was a military pilot." He was graduated from Rockford High School in 1935, attended Beloit College for two years, then entered West Point Military Academy in 1937.

After winning his wings in 1942, he served as pilot instructor, flight commander, and operations officer for a tow target unit and bombardment squadron commander in the states and overseas. Lt. Colonel. Ascani flew 52 combat missions in Italy during World War II. In 1950 he would receive the French Croix de Guerre for "participating in preparatory air raids ... (contributing to) successful debarkation of the Allies in the

Mediterranean sector.”

In the ensuing years, Ascani served at Wright-Patterson and Edwards Air Force bases in flight test divisions and engineering and also as a test pilot. Promoted to Colonel, he assumed the position of Vice Commander at the Edwards flight test center in 1951.

After graduation from the Air War College, he commanded the 86th Fighter Interceptor Group in Germany (1954), followed by command of the 50th Fighter-Bomber Wing based first in Germany, then in France. Upon his return to Wright-Patterson, 1975 - 1965, he held both executive staff and command positions. In 1963, President John F. Kennedy nominated him for Brigadier General; and in 1964 Lyndon B. Johnson nominated him for Major General.

Ascani assumed direct charge of the XB 70 supersonic project in 1964. In 1965, he served as Vice Commander of the Fifth Air Force, Pacific Air Forces, Fuchu Air Station, Japan. During that duty, he received the Legion of Merit award. Before retiring in 1973, Ascani served in positions related to logistics, weapons systems evaluations, research and engineering.

Sources: Dean Todd; Rockfordiana Files, Rockford Public Library

REAR ADMIRAL GEORGE J. DUFEK

On October 31, 1956, a navy ski plane with Rockford native Rear Admiral

George J. Dufek aboard lifted off the ice runway at McMurdo, Antarctica. After a flight exceeding seven hours, navigators on board authenticated their position. Dufek, commander of the U. S. Naval Support Force in Antarctica, stepped into minus 59 degrees Fahrenheit weather--the first American at the South Pole--and planted the American flag.

Born in Rockford, February 10, 1903, the third of Frank and Mary Dufek's four children, George attended P.A. Peterson Elementary School. The family lived at 1410 16th Ave. His father worked as a foreman in Rockford's Haddorff Piano Factory. At Rockford High School, George captained Company C of the ROTC. Accepted by academies at West Point and Annapolis, he chose the latter.

Dufek's polar experiences began in 1939, when he volunteered for the Byrd Antarctic Expedition. As navigator of the flagship USS Bear, he flew exploratory missions. But when the Pearl Harbor attack occurred, he requested overseas duty. He participated in the invasion of North Africa in November, 1942. As senior naval aviator for the commander of naval forces in North African waters, he helped plan invasions of Sicily and Salerno, Italy, as well as southern France. Later, he commanded the USS Bogue in the Atlantic. Escorted by six destroyers in an anti-submarine killer group, the Bogue, her planes and the escorts sank the final German sub lost

in World War II.

In all, Dufek participated in two expeditions to the Arctic and six to the Antarctic, commanding the navy's Operation Deepfreeze in Antarctica from 1955 -1959. He helped to establish weather bases in the North Polar area, planned 1946's Operation High Jump (the navy's extended exploration of the Antarctic), returned to resupply and to establish new stations in 1948 near the North Pole, sailing farther north under the ships own power than had any other vessels.

Then as commander of the carrier *Antietam*, Jan. 1951 -May 2, 1952, he participated in 79 days of combat operation during the Korean War. Following that service, he again returned to Antarctica, this time as Commander of Task Force 43 for Operation Deep Freeze. He had orders to construct six bases--four at coast sites, two within the interior--to support U. S. Antarctic programs for the 1957 International Geophysical Year. After completion of Operation Deepfreeze in 1959, Dufek retired from the navy. But he continued his love for the sea as director of the Maritime Museum, Newport News, Virginia. He died on his 74th birthday, February 10, 1977.

Sources: Dean Todd; Jensen, Peggy Dahlberg, "Operation Deep Freeze," *Rockford Magazine*, (October 1988), 15-18, 77.



COLONEL BERT "FISH" HASSELL

Pioneer pilot Hassell, holder of license number 20 issued in 1914, acquired his nickname in March 1915 after an unexpected dip in chilly Lake Michigan while showing off low-level precision flying in a Curtiss F-Boat. Onlookers said, "Anyone who can swim in that water must be a fish."

He served in the Army Air Corps during World War I, then stayed on as an active reserve officer. Flying a post-war stint as a Canadian bush pilot (1923-24), he gained insight into advantages of Arctic flight: less turbulence and winter fog dispersed by cold temperatures.

Remembering also geography lessons taught with a globe--not a flat map--he championed the concept of shorter routes via Arctic circle flight. For almost forty years he sent reports, suggestions, pleadings, plans and outlines for polar training, defense bases and airways to the War Department and the Air Force. Not until 1951 when he was recalled to active duty to supervise construction of air bases at Thule in northern Greenland did he feel that his polar concept had been accepted.

To introduce his theory of air routes flown over the Arctic Circle, he instigated a flight from Rockford to Stockholm in a specially-designed Stinson Detroit, August 16, 1928. A fuel shortage forced Hassell and his

companion, Parker "Shorty" Cramer, to land 90 miles south of an intended destination, a Michigan University research camp in Greenland. Surviving on melted ice and pemmican (dried caribou meat), the two men stumbled, staggered and plodded for two weeks detouring around ice crevasses, swimming across rivers, crossing a mountain range and avoiding quicksand. Finally Eskimos alerted university personnel after spotting a fire the men had started to drive away hordes of mosquitoes. On September 5, a *New York Times* headline proclaimed, "Hassell and Cramer rescued in Greenland; Fliers wandered two weeks over icy wastes."

Hassell, as an active Air Force officer and reservist, went on to command and to build Arctic bases in Canada, Greenland and Iceland before, during and after World War II. His plane remained on the ice cap until airlifted in 1968. Restored now, it has a permanent home at Rockford's Midway Village and Museum Center.

Local Hassell addresses: Parents Ellis and Elise, in 1911, owned a millinery shop at 411 Seventh St. Bert and his wife Rosalie with their five children--John, Vic, Missy, Mary and Peter-- lived at 130 Welty Ave.

Sources: Hassell, Bert, *Fish Hassell--A Viking With Wings*, Bend, Oregon: Maverick Press, 1987. (Published posthumously, based on edited logbook entries) and Mary Hassell Lyons.

GENERAL LAURENCE S. KUTER

Laurence Kuter, at 36 years of age, having received Brigadier General

status (nominated by Franklin D. Roosevelt), became the U. S. Army's youngest general. Two years later, he would become the second youngest Major General. He gained distinction not only for his meteoric rise to leadership, but also as the founding father of the Air Force.

A 1923 graduate of Rockford High School, he participated in ROTC, the student council, the debate team, and football. The top scholar in his class, he served as president. He would marry one of his classmates, Ethel Lyddon. At West Point Military Academy, he graduated in the top five, class of 1927. Qualifying as a bomber pilot, he later graduated from the Air Corps Tactical School at the top of his class notwithstanding he was the youngest officer present.

An air power enthusiast, he acquired a great range of experience with bombers. During 1941, he served on a team planning for the air assault on Hitler's Germany. During 1943, he commanded the Allied Tactical Air Force in North Africa and later, from Washington, helped establish the United States Strategic Air Force in the Pacific.

When Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin met at Yalta in February 1945, Kuter represented the American Air Force, standing in for a seriously-ill General Henry Arnold. Credited with planning the air war in Europe, he commanded the Atlantic Division of the AAF in 1945. Truman appointed Kuter Deputy

Chief of Air staff in 1951. Under Eisenhower in 1955, Kuter, now a four-star general, served as Commander of the USAF in Tokyo. His last command before retiring from the military would be as Chief of the North American Air Defense Command, a post he held from 1959 -62. Next as a vice-president of Pan-American World Airways, he assisted in the development of the 747 jet transport.

Kuter received the following medals: Legion of Merit, Distinguished Service Medal with oak leaf cluster, Bronze Star, French Legion of Honor, and Order of the British Empire.

Sources: Dean Todd; *Rockfordiana Files*, Rockford Public library.

BRIGADIER GENERAL LEWIS "BUD" STOCKING

As a major, Stocking commanded a Third Air Force A-20 attack squadron that, among his 32 combat missions, supported the 1943 World War II D-day landings in Normandy.

In Rockford, he lived with his parents, Lewis and Elizabeth Stocking, at 232 Guard Street. A 1935 Rockford High School graduate, he had been a captain and a company commander in ROTC. Following graduation from West Point in 1939, he received both basic and advanced flying at Randolph and Kelly fields in Texas. He then served as a flying instructor at Randolph.

He assumed the position of director of flying training in 1948 for the American Mission for Aid To Turkey. Other assignments included Alaska, Commander of the 34th Air Division, Albuquerque (1959), and director of NORAD's Combat Operations Center, Colorado Springs, Colorado. There he met and served briefly under General Kuter.

Stocking married Mary Ann Hilsman of Atlanta. They had three children, Mary, Suzanne and Thomas.

Sources: Dean Todd; *Rockfordiana Files*, Rockford Public Library.

Two other Illinois men received Hall of Fame Status in 1997

LT. GENERAL BENJAMIN O. DAVIS JR., the first black military pilot to earn his wings and the first black general officer in the Air Force, commanded the 332nd Fighter Group during World War II. He received both the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Silver Star. Before his retirement in 1970, he had served as Chief of Staff both in Europe and in Korea.

HAROLD WILLIAM SPENCER, a Chicago native, flew 58 combat missions in P-51 fighters and destroyed four enemy planes during World War II. Active later in civilian aviation, he earned licenses and ratings including airline transport pilot and both flight and instrument instructor.



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entertain with stories and fact, and to enrich lives regarding what is available to enjoy, to
treasure and to honor.

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