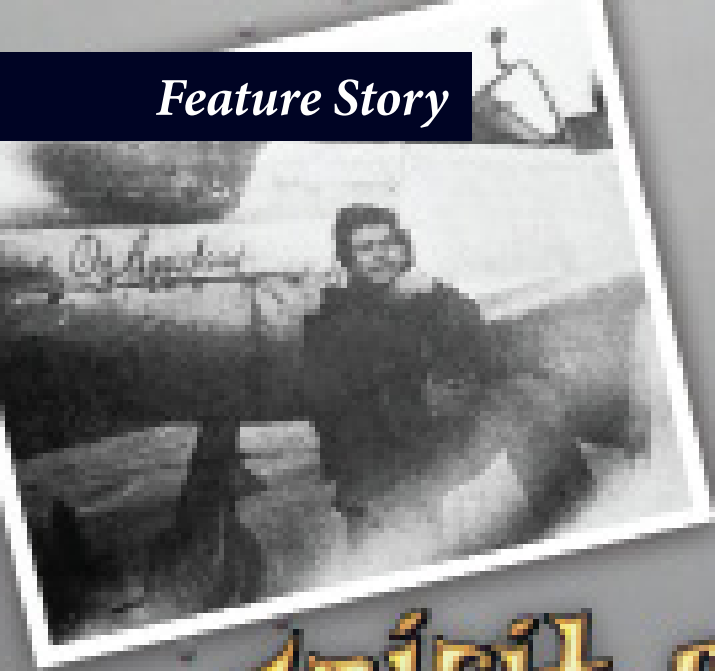


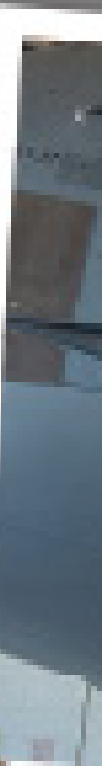
Feature Story



Then
& Now

Spirit of AGGIELAND AAM

by
Dennis
Havenport '01



The Spirit of Aggieland can take many forms and touches people in different ways. No matter whether the application is in somber, happy, or prideful connotations, the “Spirit can never be told” is encompassing and endearing to all Aggies. In this vein, two proud and highly decorated Aggie pilots, though generations apart, dedicated their aircraft to honor Texas A&M and the Corps of Cadets by naming them “Spirit of Aggieland” and “Spirit of Aggieland II.”

U.S. Army Air Corps Lieutenant Luther E. “Muggs” Bennett, Jr. ’41 flew the original “Spirit of Aggieland” P-51 Mustang, serial #44-11637 OC-V. Muggs was raised on the family farm in the community of Kirk, TX, which is located between Groesbeck and Mart. He followed his two brothers, James ’38 and Allyn ’39, to the Agricultural and Mechanical College of Texas, where he majored in Agronomy and was a member of B Battery, Field Artillery. Typical of The Greatest Generation, the three Bennett brothers served their country in World War II. Allyn was a P-39 pilot in the Pacific with 117 combat missions, and James was an artillery officer in Europe. Thankfully, all survived the war.

An Aggie family ritual developed when the three Bennett brothers were enrolled at A&M at the same time. At the beginning of each semester, their dad, Luther Bennett, Sr. would take them to the train station in Groesbeck. He would purchase one ticket and put Muggs on the train with all of the baggage. Afterwards, Mr. Bennett would drop James and Allyn off on the highway to hitchhike the 90 miles to College Station. The brothers

would beat the train to College Station and wait for underclassman Muggs to arrive. After a little sibling/upperclassman Good Bull hazing, James and Allyn would pick up their luggage and be on their way.

Mr. Bennett entered the Army Air Corps as a private. After demonstrating the typical Aggie and Texas farm boy moxie and smarts, he was selected for and completed officer candidate and flight school. He trained at bases in Mission, TX; Illinois; Connecticut; and Connally Air Force Base, Waco, TX. While stationed in Waco, he took advantage of the proximity of the family farm and buzzed the homefolks on a few occasions, thrilling the entire family. After earning his wings, Lt Bennett was assigned to the 359th Fighter Squadron of the 356th Fighter Group of the Mighty 8th Air Force. Muggs began his combat service flying a P-47 Thunderbolt. Soon after, the P-47s were phased out, and he transferred to the P-51 Mustang, the plane whose nose art was painted “Spirit of Aggieland” to commemorate and represent Muggs’ beloved Texas A&M. Flying out of Royal Air Force Station Martlesham Heath, England, the basic missions of the 356th Fighter Group were to escort the long-range bombers and to attack, strafe, and bomb all parts of the German war machine. Captain Bennett flew 35 missions during 1944 and 1945 and was discharged from the Army Air Corps at the end of the war. Muggs enjoyed recalling his A&M experiences to his very interested Aggie nephews, John Maline ’70, Ken Bennett ’72, and Greg Barnes ’84. However, typical of many combat veterans, he



Aggie Cadet Muggs Bennett '41

did not talk much about his World War II experiences. Thankfully, he did pass down a few war stories and tidbits of other wartime experiences to his daughter Beverly Bennett Stepp and his nephews. They recall the following stories.

Muggs once landed in a field somewhere in Europe, reason and specific location unknown. After taxiing down the field and turning around, he found himself in a rather insecure situation, facing a well-armed group of people. Naturally, Muggs was initially startled, but since they were not shooting at him, he quickly discerned they were Americans, Allies, or friendly members of the Underground. However, he did not stay around long enough for introductions, quickly taking off just in case.

On another mission, the “Spirit of Aggieland” took a number of hits. Fortunately, he made it back over the English Channel and performed an emergency landing on a beach. In another instance, Muggs’ nephew, John Maline ’70, shared, “Muggs had a 16mm film from his gun camera that I borrowed while at A&M and watched it on one of the school’s projectors. It was fascinating watching him dog fighting with German fighters and shooting up trains and truck convoys.”

After the war, Mr. Bennett returned to the family farm where he farmed and ranched. Later he bought the local Mobil Oil distributorship and operated a gas station. In the early 1960s, he became a banker, and joined the Farmers State Bank in Groesbeck, TX, from where he retired as Vice President in 1988. He was an active

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church member, Mason, and served the community well. Always a hard worker and a farmer and rancher at heart, he would return from a day at the bank, change into his “real” work clothes and go to work on the farm. In 1987, the Bennett family farm was recognized by the Texas Legislature for being in continuous operation by a single family for over 100 years. Today, Muggs’ granddaughter and her husband maintain a cattle operation on the property.

Though still near and dear to the Bennett family, the story of the original “Spirit of Aggieland” had faded with the passage of time into Aggie obscurity.

However, fast forward 71 years as another Aggie pilot makes a significant discovery that causes Aggie history to repeat itself.

Colonel Bruce Cox ’86 was a fighter pilot for the first 28 years of his Air Force career. During that period of time, he held many leadership positions within the 10th Air Force. Highly decorated, Col Cox flew 158 missions in 11 combat deployments, logging in over 565 flying hours.

In December 2014, Col Cox had the incredible opportunity to begin a new challenge as the Commander of the 307th Bomb Wing at Barksdale Air Force Base, LA. It is unusual and speaks very well for Col Cox that a fighter pilot was presented an opportunity to command a bomb wing. With great responsibilities, the 307th is the Air Force Reserve Command’s sole bomb wing. It consists of a B-52H Stratofortress Group and a B-1B Lancer Group. It is the Air Force’s only Bomb Wing that features two different types of bombers. The 307th Bomb Wing provides combat ready air crews, maintenance personnel, and combat support to execute both conventional and nuclear global operational tasks. Additionally, the Unit performs all B-52H formal training for active Air Force and Air Force Reserve personnel. Within this, Col Cox leads more than 1,900 citizen-airmen and civilian personnel, as well as maintaining responsibility for the associated resources.



Photos of Muggs Bennett '41 and fellow servicemen

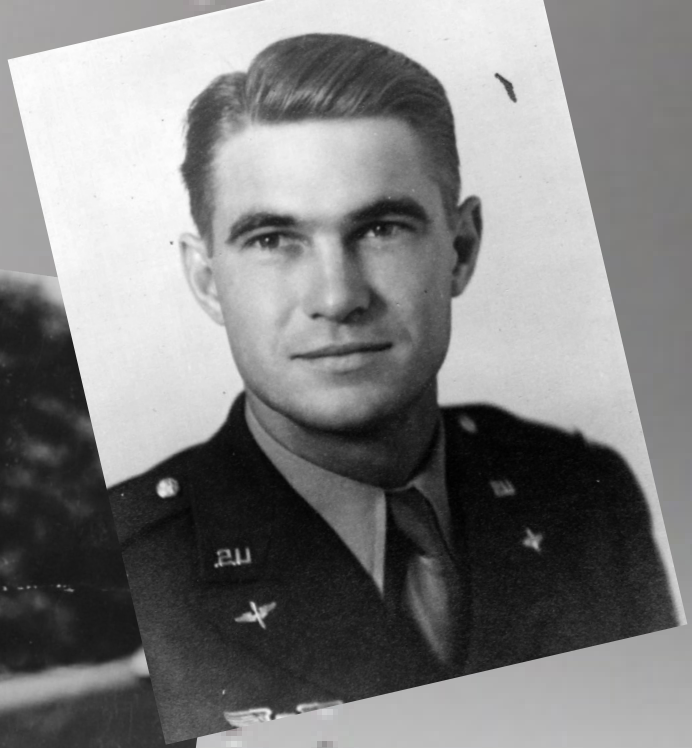
Among Col Cox’s philosophies is that history and training makes one smart and efficient, while heritage makes one proud. A great way to display and build heritage is through nose art. He advocates a more progressive, non-sexist style of nose art as compared to that of an earlier era. There is some nose art in the regular Air Force. Unfortunately, the more frequent rotation of pilots, crews, and support personnel does not allow as much consistency to accommodate personalized nose art. However, such art is much more common on Reserve aircraft, as the pilot and support personnel are attached to their airplanes for longer periods of time. In many instances, Reservists stay with the same airplane for their entire careers. This consistency provides a much better opportunity to develop heritage and ownership of their airplanes through nose art.

One of Col Cox’s initial decisions was to choose the nose art for his personal B-52, the Flagship of the 307th Bomb Wing. Since he did not have nose art on his fighter aircraft, Col Cox did not have anything to transfer to his personal aircraft. Starting from square one, he researched many nose art photographs for ideas to apply to his personalized nose art. The search abruptly ended when he came across the grainy old World War II

photograph of a pilot posed beside his P-51 Mustang, “Spirit of Aggieland.”

In tribute to the Texas A&M Corps of Cadets, the organization that forged him to become the leader, patriot, and Air Force Officer he is, Col Cox named his command aircraft “Spirit of Aggieland,” and a nose art was developed.

The official unveiling of the “Spirit of Aggieland” was a special Aggie event. It was scheduled on the day that Lieutenant General Stephen “Seve” Wilson ’81 was set to take his final flight as Commander of Global Strike Command at Barksdale AFB, LA, before moving to his next assignment. Lt Gen Wilson was invited to drop by a nearby hangar to take a look at a new nose art on a B-52 while in route to his personal aircraft. There, Lt Gen Wilson was greeted by a contingent of Aggies: Colonel Bruce Cox ’86, Lieutenant Colonel Marty Salinas ’98, and Captain Christian Everson ’09. Entering the hangar to the sounds of “The Spirit of Aggieland” playing over the PA system, the new “Spirit of Aggieland” nose art came into full view as the group proceeded from the rear to the front of the flagship bomber. The group had a few Aggie moments and then posed for photographs. Lt Gen Wilson departed the hangar to the



rendering of salutes by the Aggies and the strains of “The Spirit of Aggieland.” Later that evening at his farewell event, Lt Gen Wilson was presented a photograph of the nose art with his name inscribed under the “Spirit of Aggieland.” Permanent emblazonment of Col Cox’s name was done after the photo was taken. Additionally, in tribute and respect to the original “Spirit of Aggieland,” Col Cox has designated his plane as the “Spirit of Aggieland II.”

Due to a very active and mobile career and stationed all around the world, Col Cox regrets not having the opportunity to return to campus often. He would love to be in position to return to Texas A&M and work with Cadets some day. However, Col Cox has flown over campus on countless occasions in both pre-game flyovers and flyovers during events at the George Bush Presidential Library. As a matter of fact, he participated in so many Bush Library flyovers that former President George H. W. Bush invited him for a personal visit. Significantly, Col Cox was the pilot that performed the pull up maneuver as part of the Missing Man Formation flyover of Kyle Field after the Bonfire tragedy.

At Texas A&M, Col Cox was a member of Squadron 6 during his fish year. He then moved with about half of Squadron 6 to form Squadron 13 and spent his last

three years there. Col Cox proudly notes that his classmates still remain a “band of brothers,” maintaining frequent contact and getting together as often as possible.

Though 45 years apart, by naming and dedicating their planes to the Aggie Spirit, these Aggie warriors demonstrate the same love and respect for Texas A&M and the Corps of Cadets that so many Aggies feel. Just as the World War II era Aggies would rally around and take pride in the original “Spirit of Aggieland,” present day Aggies rally around and take pride in the “Spirit of Aggieland II.” The Spirit of Aggieland has indeed stood the test of time.

Credits for original “Spirit of Aggieland”: This incredible Aggie story would never have been put together without the help of Captain Muggs Bennett’s daughter, Beverly Bennett Stepp, and his nephews, John Maline ’70, Ken Bennett ’72 and Greg Barnes ’84. In the true Spirit of the 12th Man, they provided photos of and information about Muggs in record time. Thanks also to Debra Kujawa, Managing Director of the 8th Air Force Historical Society in Savannah, GA, for providing timely information. Other information is also located at <http://www.littlefriends.co.uk>.

Additional Bennett notes: (1) A model of a P-51 and photograph of the “Spirit of

Aggieland” is remembered to have been displayed in Loupot’s Bookstore back in the 1970s. If anyone has information on the whereabouts of these Aggie treasures, please contact the Texas Aggie Corps of Cadets Association (CCA). (2) There is a rendering of the “Spirit of Aggieland,” OC-V, on the 356th Fighter Group page of the 8th Air Force Historical Society web site at <http://www.8thafhs.org/fighter/356fg.htm>. (3) The P-51 Mustang Serial #44-11637 OC-V

Mr. Bennett is buried in Faulkenberry Cemetery, Groesbeck, TX.
His gravestone reads:

Luther E. Bennett Jr.
Captain US Army Air Forces
Feb 17 1919 – Jan 11 1997
Lovingly known as Muggs

Credits for “Spirit of Aggieland II”: A big thank you goes to Major Kyle Holt ’00, B Battery, Fightin’ Texas Aggie Band and currently assigned to the 307th Bomb Wing. Thanks also to Jessica Daurizio, 307th Bomb Wing Public Affairs/Protocol, and Master Sergeant Dachele Melville, USAF, both located at Barksdale Air Force Base, LA. **G**