

When Planes Stop and Base Closes, Silence Will Hurt Most

by [Kathleen M. Rodgers](#) on Thursday, July 21, 2011 at 5:54pm

(After visiting the former **England Air Force Base** last week, I decided to share this essay I wrote for the July 16, 1992 *Air Force Times*.)

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Alexandria, La. – It's a Sunday afternoon in early spring and the kids and I are across the street at Ruth's house. We spend a lot of time with our neighbors in this mostly civilian neighborhood, and today, as we are having impromptu footraces and squirt-gun fights, a lone A-10 Thunderbolt II passes over the subdivision on its way to England Air Force Base, just outside of town.

It goes unnoticed by everyone but Ruth and me. We squint our eyes and crane our necks back and follow the jet till it's out of sight. Ruth is silent and won't look at me. We must be thinking the same thing: By summer all the planes will be gone. The base is closing. Too quickly.

Why didn't anyone else look up? It is because military aircraft fly over our homes all the time and there's nothing unusual about that. Or is it that I'm more aware because my husband, a commercial airline pilot, is a retired Air Force fighter pilot and flew A-10s 12 of the 20 years he spent inside military cockpits.

In the past, before "base closures" and "the drawdown" became buzzwords of the '90s, there was nothing unusual about military aircraft flying over the house on a Sunday afternoon. If they were A-10s, they were most likely coming home from a weekend cross country or deployment. Other Air Force and Navy planes flew over on a regular basis, landing at the base because of an in-flight emergency or simply to refuel.

Now, however, military airplanes flying overhead are an endangered species.

Most of the neighbors are like most people who live near an airport or air base: They're used to the noise. Some don't even hear it. But when the base finally closes and military traffic no longer flies in these skies – will the silence hurt their ears?

And what about my friend, Ruth, a civilian? Why did she stop what she was doing, surrounded by kids armed with squirt guns, to look up and then say nothing?

Ruth's story is a special one. She grew up in a big family near the base during the Cold War. Five of her six brothers served in the military – three Marines and two Army. The two brothers that stand out in her mind, and have a direct link to England AFB, are Bill, a former Marine fighter pilot now a captain for a major airline, and Lloyd, a former Marine who served in the elite HMS-1 Marine Helicopter Squadron (the presidential helicopter squadron) at the time of President Kennedy's assassination.

Ruth loves to tell about a time when her big brother Bill, while on active duty, used to fly cross country in his F-8 Crusader and buzz over the top of the old home place. This was the family's signal to go to the base and pick him up.

She says Bill and Lloyd give England AFB all the credit for sparking their interest in flying. Their father, who was also fascinated with airplanes, used to pile the kids up in the back of his truck and drive them out to the base so they could watch the planes fly. Lloyd says he was about 9 or 10 years old when

he realized he longed to fly after watching F-86 Sabres take off and land. Bill got swept up in Lloyd's enthusiasm and another flier was born.

In the last week of May, Ruth calls. I can't tell if she's laughing or crying, but I feel her excitement as she speaks. She tells me she's out at her folks' helping her brother Lloyd put a new roof on their house. She's talking a mile a minute but I hang on to her every word. She says they were just breaking for lunch and had headed inside, when out of nowhere they heard something familiar – that distinct sound that's part wail, whine and power.

On instinct, they ran outside as a four-ship of A-10s came over the house. She says it was just like the old days when Bill would fly over the place in an F-8, announcing his arrival. Lloyd turned to her and said, half joking, "Well, you reckon it's time we head out to the base to pick up Bill?"

When the planes stop coming over and the base is closed, I think silence will more than hurt their ears.

It will break their hearts.

~ Kathleen M. Rodgers

author of the award-winning novel "The Final Salute."