

Battle of Britain: RAF piano burning tradition

By Dr. Roy Heidicker, 4th Fighter Wing / Published August 18, 2017

SEYMOUR JOHNSON AIR FORCE BASE, N.C. --

The heritage of the 4th Fighter Wing began with the Royal Air Force Eagle Squadrons in World War II. Long before Pearl Harbor and American entry into the war, these American volunteers fought with England against the Nazis. These squadrons, 71, 121 and 133, became the 334th, 335th and 336th Fighter Squadrons of the 4th Fighter Group in September 1942.

Every year the 4 FW commemorates the Battle of Britain. This year's event will take place at Sept. 15 2017 to coincide with the wing's 75th Anniversary. The highlight of the event, this year and every year, will be the burning of the pianos. Multiple squadrons on base are scheduled to enter a piano in the competition. Each piano will be distinctively decorated, often in the colors and emblem of each squadron. The rules of the competition appear to be a bit murky. This is most likely due to the excitement generated by combining those two party favorites: enthusiasm and fire. The first place piano is saved from the fire to be returned to the squadron. The second place piano squadron is awarded a prize, but their piano is sentenced to the flames. Third through next to last, no prize and off to the fire. The last place piano is supposed to be spared, but most often winds up in the inferno.

Prior to burning, the pianos are broken up by powerful young warriors wielding axes and sledgehammers. Your correspondent has never actually witnessed a chainsaw being utilized, but rumors persist. Tradition demands the pianos are broken up into fairly small pieces, not all that easy a thing to do. I recommend you try it the next time you are looking for something to do. This tradition is apparently not a hard and fast rule as relatively intact pianos have been put to the torch.

In the RAF, who also continue the practice of piano burning, even the process of delivering the piano can be special. On at least one occasion the piano was delivered suspended beneath a RAF Search and Rescue helicopter. There is no record of a Guided Bomb Unit piano being "delivered" by an F-15E Strike Eagle. That would certainly eliminate the need for the axes and sledgehammers aspect of the tradition.

My goal in writing this article was to share with you the actual historical precedent for the tradition of piano burning. As a PhD trained Air Force historian this

appeared to be a challenge, but certainly doable. I contacted three extraordinary people, all British, in my quest for an answer. These included Mr. Phil Bonner, a 38-year veteran of the RAF, and Mr. Peter Elliott, the Senior Keeper at the Department of Research & Information Services, RAF Museum, Hendon. I also interviewed Flight Officer Pete Walker, a former exchange pilot with the 336th Fighter Squadron on loan from the Royal Air Force.

It is my sad duty to report that the actual historical precedent for RAF piano burning is unknown. However, there are rumors and legends aplenty and we will glance at the best of these. **One legend begins that during World War I all RAF pilots were upstanding English “gentlemen.”** Between the wars and particularly during the early days of World War II, the demand for pilots exceeded the number of gentlemen available. As all RAF pilots should be gentlemen, the proposed solution was to have anyone not trained in playing the piano (everyone knows all English gentlemen know how to play the piano) be given piano lessons. This did not go over terribly well with young pilots who were already being pushed to the limit fighting the German Luftwaffe. One day, for reasons unknown, a squadron club burned to the ground. In a classic “good news/bad news” scenario the piano learning pilots realized that while the club was gone, so too was the dreaded piano. The word went out to other squadrons and soon pianos were being dragged outside the clubs and ignited. Hard to play a piano that’s been turned to ash.

Some say the piano burning tradition is somehow connected to Viking funerals. That is where the fallen Viking is placed on a ship and the ship is set afire as it is cast off into the sea. There is also a rumor (it being a British tradition) that it dates back to the Gunpowder Plot. This was a plan to blow up the House of Lords in 1605. As the pianos are burned up, but not blown up, I have decided to discount this theory.

This might be the best opportunity to mention that the Royal Navy believes that the RAF has, “no traditions, just bad habits!” Of course the Royal Navy has its own way of disposing of pianos. When the HMS Ark Royal, a British aircraft carrier, was decommissioned, the officers decided to bury the Wardroom piano at sea. They did this by firing the piano from one of the ship’s catapults into the ocean. No bad habits displayed there.

The legend that I believe makes the most sense involves a piano playing pilot during the Battle of Britain. This pilot, whose name will forever be shrouded in mystery, was a truly fine piano player. After some tough missions the pilots could

always look forward to enjoying the beautiful music and camaraderie that it inspired in the club. One sad day the battle claimed another brave RAF pilot, the piano player. That evening when his comrades gathered at the club they realized that never again would they experience the magnificent piano playing of their friend and colleague. They acknowledged he could never be replaced so in his memory they carried the piano outside the club and burned it.

This year when we hold this event and remember the Battle of Britain we can choose any of these legends or others that persist about why pianos are burned. That is the nature of legends, they always contain mystery and secrets that may never be revealed. What is important is that we honor the RAF pilots and the British people who persevered and then triumphed in the Battle of Britain. And we, and the world, can never forget our RAF Eagle Squadrons, volunteers all, who are the foundation of the 4th Fighter Wing.