A photograph of two F-15E Strike Eagles in flight. One aircraft is in the foreground, angled towards the left, showing its cockpit, wings, and tail. The tail fin has the letters 'LN7' and a red and white striped band. The second aircraft is partially visible in the upper right corner, showing its nose and cockpit. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

*Two F-15E Strike Eagles from the 494th Fighter Squadron, known as the "Black Panthers," fly in the airspace over Britain.*



**They have seen action in a variety of hot spots.**

# Panthers Over Europe

**Photography by Erik Hildebrandt**





*The black panther on the emblem adorning the 494th Fighter Squadron building at RAF Lakenheath, UK, has been updated from the unit's World War II days when a black panther stretched across a bomb. This one with its ferocious, about-to-strike pose mirrors the unit's current precision strike, air-to-ground mission employing the F-15E Strike Eagle.*



Photos by Erik Hildebrandt



*Above, 494th crews prepare for the day's flying. At left, a row of F-15Es.*

*The 494th is one of two F-15E units under Lakenheath's 48th Fighter Wing, known as the "Liberty Wing," a designation officially recognized in 1954. The other F-15E unit is the 492nd Fighter Squadron. A third 48th flying unit, the 493rd Fighter Squadron, flies the F-15C.*

*As the only F-15 wing in US Air Forces in Europe, the 48th provides both air-to-air and air-to-ground capability with its complementary F-15s.*

*At right, a 494th F-15E screams down the runway.*







*The Black Panther F-15Es are in high demand. Just two weeks after helping patrol over northern Iraq, the 494th took part in Operation Allied Force. The Panthers dropped 38 percent of all the precision guided munitions delivered during the operation. They flew more than 4,000 combat hours largely due to the heroic efforts of their maintenance crews. Even though shorthanded, the maintainers achieved a 99.4 percent mission launch rate.*

*At top, two Strike Eagles fly over the UK, while in the inset photo, an Eagle sits in front of a Cold War-era hardened aircraft shelter. At right, 494th maintenance crews.*





**The 494th was activated as the 57th Bombardment Squadron (Light) in 1941 and assigned to the 48th Bombardment Group. In August 1943 it was redesignated the 494th Fighter-Bomber Squadron, still under the 48th. The unit first came to the UK in 1944. Over the years the Panthers flew a number of aircraft including the P-39, P-40, P-47, and following a seven-year deactivation, the F-84G, F-86F, F-100D, F-4D, and F-111F.**

**In 1986, 494th F-111Fs headed out for Operation El Dorado Canyon—strikes against Tripoli for Libyan-incited terrorist attacks on US citizens.**

**At right, a park highlights aircraft—an F-15, F-111, and a British Spitfire—that have been a part of Lakenheath's history.**



Photos by Erik Hildebrandt



**Near Lakenheath is the American Air Museum in Britain at Duxford. The museum's theme is the role of US forces in Britain during World War II.**

**At left is a restored World War II control tower located at the Duxford Airfield.**

**Below, adding more flavor to the area around the Black Panther's home is a Cambridge pub—located 25 miles from Lakenheath. It was well-known to World War II bomber and fighter crews, both American and British. Before a mission, crews used smoke from candles to write their names on the ceiling of one of the rooms. The pub is still active.**

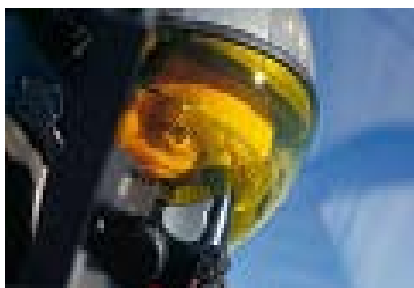






*The Black Panthers returned to the UK with the 48th Fighter Wing in 1960, when the wing set up shop at Lakenheath. From there the unit has participated in operations including El Dorado Canyon, Desert Shield and Storm, Provide Comfort, and on through to today's war on terror. It was Provide Comfort in which the Panthers first took their new F-15Es into action. They also extended their role from air-to-ground to air-to-air coverage, as they flew defense counterair and reconnaissance missions.*

*Above, two Black Panther F-15Es break away from each other during air-to-air training. At right, an aerial view of some hardened aircraft shelters at Lakenheath.*



*As ever, the 494th Black Panthers are poised to strike wherever duty calls. ■*