

Report from Bonn by Dean Andromidas

Air show draws 250-300,000

The Ramstein "Flugtag" does more for NATO's solidarity than an army of State Department diplomats ever could.

The largest peace demonstration this year was held at Ramstein Air Base, the home of the U.S. Air Force in West Germany, where over 250,000 West German citizens as well as large numbers of Belgians, Dutch, French, and Americans attended the annual Ramstein Air Show. Despite heavy rains and below-normal temperatures, the huge crowd was a testimony to the popular support for NATO's defense effort and especially America's vital participation.

The annual event, a postwar tradition, has become a target of Gramm-Rudman budget cutters in Congress, who are seeking a withdrawal of American forces from Western Europe, and the "Moscow faction" among German political parties. The circles eager for an arms control deal with Moscow find these displays of pro-American, pro-NATO popular support intolerable, a fact underscored by the near blackout of the event in the liberal media here.

The Ramstein Air Show, *Flugtag* in German, is an annual event sponsored by the U.S. Air Force's 86th Tactical Fighter Wing, based at Ramstein Air Base in the central part of West Germany, and is the largest air show in Europe. The weather, which could be euphemistically described as "horrible—with heavy clouds, pouring rain, and chilly temperatures—kept the crowd below the usual 500,000-1,000,000. Ramstein's location, within a day's drive of France, Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, makes it a true NATO-wide event. This year's event was extra special, since it also commemorated

the 40th anniversary of the founding of the U.S. Air Force in 1947.

The Air Show gives an opportunity for the public, especially children, to see NATO's front-line aircraft. Those on display included the American F-15 Eagle, the U.S.'s most advanced and sophisticated air interceptor; the F-16, one of America's most advanced multipurpose fighters which is also flown by the air forces of Belgium, Denmark, and the Netherlands; the F-111, the U.S. strike bomber best known for the April 1986 Libya raid.

Also on display were various versions of the French Mirage 2000 and hosts of other aircraft from fighters to transports to electronic warfare aircraft. Of special note were two new systems that only recently joined NATO's air defense resources. One was the Patriot air defense missile system. Its phased array radar, state-of-the-art computerized tracking system, and high velocity and altitude missile give it an anti-missile as well as anti-aircraft capability. The second was one of the NATO's 18 new Boeing AWAC early warning surveillance aircraft. The AWAC is the only system managed fully by the NATO staff at SHAPE headquarters in Belgium.

Several of these planes are in the air 24 hours a day patrolling the full length of the NATO-Warsaw Pact border from Denmark to Turkey. Also on hand, for the first time, was an American B-52 strategic bomber flown from the Strategic Air Command Base near Rome, New York.

By far the biggest attraction is the live air show, where some of NATO's

most powerful aircraft put on a performance that is hard to imagine if you haven't seen it, and hard to forget if you ever have. Planes like the U.S. front-line interceptor F-15, an aircraft which can fly at Mach 2.5 and climb to an altitude of 98,000 feet in 3 minutes will do loop the loops and other aerial acrobatics at breathtaking speeds. But to the disappointment of the crowds, bad weather prevented most of the show from being performed. Still, the three separate aerobatic teams including the French Patrouille de France, the Italian Freccia Tricolori, and the British Red Arrows were able to perform, to the delight of an audience that had to stand for hours, often in the rain.

Although this was the only air show held in West Germany this year, formerly it was only one of nearly a dozen air shows held on American bases here. All fell victim to Gramm-Rudman budget cuts and a State Department policy for American forces to keep a "low profile" for fear of "provoking" anti-Americanism. Germany's "Moscow faction," in the form of the pro-terrorist Green Party and the Social Democratic Party, has worked to try to ban even this show. Busy trying to muster support for a ban in the surrounding communities, the Greens were only able to mount a protest of 30 people outside one of the air base gates, which they later called a "symbolic" protest. Meanwhile the parliamentary faction of the Social Democratic Party in Rhineland Palatinate, where Ramstein is located, unsuccessfully attempted to have it banned.

As is often the case, the population voted with their feet, and the tremendous turnout, despite the heavy rain, contrasted sharply with State Department fears of "provoking" popular hostility.