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60 Years of NATO TIGERS

Canadian Hot Air Balloon Championship 2021



Tiger Meet Turns 60!



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In 1961, three NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) squadrons, all of which had a tiger in their respective emblems, gathered at RAF (Royal Air Force) Woodbridge in England and held the first 'Tiger Meet'. This turned into an annual tradition that is still going strong today.

'Tiger spirit' with German ground crew



This year, the Tiger Meet reached the age of sixty: a birthday which was well celebrated. The location was Belgian Air Force airbase Kleine Brogel, where the hosting unit, 23 Smaldeel, also celebrated its own 70th anniversary.



Czech Mi-35 Hind with colourful markings

Tiger Meets are intended to promote solidarity between NATO members and to learn from each other. This is done by full-scale exercise scenarios on the one hand, and all kinds of social events on the other hand. During the early years, emphasis was placed on the social part, but later on full COMAO (Combined Air Operations), CAS (Close Air Support) and DACT (Dissimilar Air Combat Training) missions were integrated in Tiger Meets. This way, these gatherings have considerable operational value. As Major General Karsten Stoye, Chief of Staff of the NATO Allied Air Command assessed, "NATO is very glad to have an exercise in Europe like the NATO Tiger Meet. It underlines its high level of operational readiness and shows its flag with different weapon platforms from many partner states".



French Navy Rafale with full afterburner climb

Starting with three participating units in 1961, the Tiger Meet Association now has no less than 23 full members and two probationary members, all from Europe, as well as nine honorary members from the USA, Canada and India. Over the years, famous aircraft such as the F-4 Phantom, F-104 Starfighter and MiG-23 'Flogger' have been part of the Tiger elite. Currently, aircraft range from fighters such as the F-16 and JAS-39 Gripen to 'heavies', including the B-2 Spirit bomber and E-3 Sentry AWACS. Also helicopters, such as the Puma, AB.212 and Mi-24 Hind show the Tiger spirit.

The X Tiger of hosting unit 23 Smaldeel taking off



Participating squadrons all have a tiger in their emblem, or at least a similar kind of cat. The only exception is 11 Flotille of the French Navy, flying the Rafale M with a seahorse on its squadron badge! When it was admitted to the Tiger Meet Association, the squadron operated from the aircraft carrier 'Clemenceau', which had a tiger crest. Although Clemenceau has been retired years ago, the squadron has been allowed to keep its tiger-status, as its members had shown true tiger spirit in past years.

German Tiger Spirit Tornado with full afterburner



As the 2020 edition of the Tiger Meet had to be postponed to 2021, the scheduled edition of 2021 was called the Extra Tiger Meet or XTM21. This meeting was also meant to celebrate the 60th birthday of the Tiger Meet. Unfortunately, this had to be celebrated under less than ideal circumstances. Due to Covid-19, the exercise part of XTM21 had to be cancelled in the end. What was left was a long weekend with many social activities, including a formal dinner and of course the famous Tiger Games.

German crew posing in front of their EF.2000



As always, several squadrons painted at least one of their respective aircraft in very colourful tiger schemes. The most colourful no doubt was the 'Bavarian Tiger', a Typhoon of TLG 74 based in Southern Germany. Hosting unit 23 Smaldeel also had a fully painted jet, their F-16 was named 'The X Tiger' based on the eXtra Tiger Meet theme. Also, pilots and ground crew did their best to show the Tiger spirit, and tiger colours and markings could be seen everywhere during the weekend. On Monday morning, some participants used the opportunity to fly one operational mission together with F-16s of hosting 23 Smaldeel. That was the end of a short but intense celebration weekend. Hopefully, next year, a full Tiger Meet can be held in Araxos, Greece.

Polish F-16 pilot in his office, ready for a mission



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