

Herefords in the ‘Black World’

Ken Staten brought Herefords to the top-secret world of military aircraft technology.

by Sara Gugelmeyer

These days, service is an arbitrary term, often tossed around without real meaning. But to retired Air Force Major General Ken Staten (and current Hereford breeder), service isn’t subjective at all. What he provided his country, and all of us as citizens, is truly service.

Ken was born in Manhattan, Kan., and his interest in airplanes and the military lead him straight from high school graduation in Mulvane, Kan., to the Air Force Academy. But he wasn’t just joining up to get his college paid for or to fly around in cool airplanes.

“Yes, my intent from starting day was to have a career in the military,” Ken says.

And quite a career he did have. For 32 years Ken served in the Air Force. (Read more about each of his assignments in “Military biography” on Page 57.) He is a command pilot with more than 4,500 flying hours in more than 45 different types of aircraft. His military decorations and awards include the Distinguished Service Medal with oak leaf cluster, the Defense Superior Service Medal, the Legion of Merit with oak leaf cluster, the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Meritorious Service Medal, the Air Medal with 14



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oak leaf clusters, the Air Force Commendation Medal with oak leaf cluster, the Presidential Unit Citation, the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award with 2 oak leaf clusters, the Combat Readiness Medal and the Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm.

But there's much more to Ken Staten than what comes across in a military bio. His knowledge, expertise and commitment changed the course of military aviation and, consequently, affected countless lives.

He sums up his decorated service humbly: "I started as a fighter pilot, got into the test pilot business then got into what, in the Air Force, we call program management, which means managing the development, test and production of airplanes. I wound up my career as commanders of various things."

That summary is the most modest way to describe Ken's contribution to flight technology. In 1975 Ken had returned to the U.S. from his second tour in Southeast Asia, where he was an assistant operations officer and F-4 fighter pilot, when he was chosen for a much different kind of role.

Stealthy developments

Soon after arriving at the Pentagon, he was chosen, along with four other officers, to work on a top-secret project. Although no one knew about it but those who had to, Ken was part of the team of five who would bring stealth or "low observables" technology into the military.

Ken says, "We ran the stealth program for the entire department of defense for a while then the Navy and Army did their own projects with the technology. There were five of us that got together somewhat accidentally, and all were geniuses in their own way."

The first product that the country knows about out of all this work in "the black world" was the F-117. Ken served as the first program manager. "What's unique about it," Ken says, "is the exterior is all flat plates. Where most planes are curved, it was flat plates. It kind of reminded you of the way a diamond was cut. That was my baby in terms of I proposed and got approved what the airplane was intended to do, what size it was going to be, what mission it would do, how far it would fly. I got all the contracts to get it started. It was an extremely successful airplane."

Ken is, again, being modest. Since the first F-117 was developed, stealth aircraft has been used in the U.S. invasion of Panama, the first Gulf War, the Kosovo Conflict, the War in Afghanistan, the War in Iraq and the 2011 military intervention in Libya. It changed the way war could be fought from the skies.



Ken, with the very first F-117, just before its first-ever test flight on June 18, 1981. The flight was successful.

Ken's "baby" was first put to work Dec. 20, 1989, during Operation Just Cause, when two USAF F-117s bombed a Panamanian Defense Force barracks in Rio Hato, Panama.

"It wasn't that big of deal," Ken says. "Panama is not that big of country and it just took a couple days to do all this, but they used the F-117. I was really surprised and I had the opportunity to talk to the overall air force commander of that side of the world about why he did that. A lot of different planes could do it because Panama had no air defenses at all."

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Ken and his wife, Carol, at home on their Hereford farm in Missouri.

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Ken was humbled by the compliment when the Air Force commander told him, "(We used the F-117s) because I thought there were American lives at stake and I couldn't in good conscience use anything but the best thing I had."

The F-117 went on to be very useful. "It carried a huge burden in Desert Storm, the first time we fought against the Iraqis. It was very, very effective there. It took out about 90% of the most important targets with just a few airplanes. It also carried a huge burden in the second Iraqi war when America went in there full-time under George W. Bush," Ken says.

Also during this time, Ken was instrumental in the development of the B-2.

"There were many technical issues in designing an operational stealth airplane, overall size was a major question. We did the preliminary design of the F-117, where the size was acceptable, and decided we were ready to go to phase two design and test. The next conclusion was we were ready to take on the issues of a much larger airplane, a bomber."

That bomber was the B-2. "We used as many 'lessons learned' from the F-117 as we could for the B-2," Ken says.

He was not the leader on the B-2 project. It was Ken's good

friend and highly successful Air Force officer Joe Ralston who led that program.

General Ralston, who retired as a four-star general after serving in various roles in the upper echelon of the military including being the Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, has nothing but good things to say about Ken. General Ralston describes Ken's contribution not only to the Air Force but to his country: "This nation owes a great deal to Ken Staten for his leadership in fielding our very latest Air Force technology. He was the person most responsible for fielding the F-117 stealth fighter and his contributions lead directly to the B-2 bomber, the F-22 raptor, and the F-35 lightning II multi-role fighter."

Finding Herefords

It was while Ken was busy working on these projects with the Pentagon that he discovered his love of Hereford cattle. Ken and his wife, Carol, were raising two young daughters, Heather and Courtney, on a small farm in Virginia.

"We had enough grass where we could have a few cows," Ken says.

His daughters were interested in 4-H, so the Statens purchased a couple of Hereford show heifers in 1976.

"For the next six years my girls were very involved in junior showing around Virginia, all the county shows and state fair," Ken reminisces. "They had a great time, they loved it, they talk about it with great fondness today."

By keeping the girls' show heifers, the Statens quickly grew a small herd of cows.

"We had 25 cows or so and all had come from being show calves," Ken says.

He had developed a great love for the breed, and when he wasn't focused on stealth aircraft, he spent quite a bit of time immersed in Hereford culture. He would often take his friend Joe Ralston to sales and other Hereford events.

Ken explains that when working in the black world of the military, no one who isn't immediately involved can know anything about what's happening. The five of them went to work in civilian clothing and told no one what they were working on.

"No one knew that the program even existed. The first problem is to have procedures in a way that no one even knows what you're doing. So they don't ask a question because they don't know something is even there to ask about. That's the world we were in."

But everything had to have a title to it, Ken adds. "So if you



want to talk to somebody else who is in the know we have program names.”

Most military programs have a two-word name and the first word for their project was “senior” and the second word was “trend.” To this day most involved don’t know it was named after the Hereford bull Kiyiwana New Trend.

Around the same time, Ken and his friend Joe had gone to a sale hosted by the owners of Kiyiwana New Trend. Ken had been using some of Trend’s semen to artificially inseminate cows, so they spent the evening there and enjoyed the cocktail party hosted by the owners.

Shortly after, when the discussion was brought up about what name they would give their project, Joe and Ken simultaneously said “trend.”

“That was the official name and stayed with it all the way and was the publicly released name,” Ken says. “In its black world days it was called Senior Trend. The word trend was general enough that not many people ever asked where it came from, but if they did I would tell them it was from a Hereford bull.

“That wasn’t the only way the Hereford industry showed up in stealth airplane talk,” Ken says. “With this project we’d often have a subject matter or piece of hardware or something that was a separate contract.”

Those contracts were outsourced to different companies, and when Ken and his team went to the companies for bids, it was never said what the object would be used for.

Ken explains, “We’d say, ‘I want you to build this or something that looks like this, and we will pick it up at your dock. You don’t need to know anything else. You build it; if we’re satisfied with it, we’ll send a truck and take it to the assembly plant.’”

Similarly each of these contracted parts needed code names. “We had two really important technical

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studies and we did them in competitive mode,” Ken says, “so we could cross-check between the two and compare results. Neither one knew the other existed.”

For this project, Ken and Joe chose the code names “WSF” and “PRL.”

“Everybody in the program tried to figure out what that stood for. They never did and Joe and I never told them,” Ken says.

The two acronyms were actually part of the name of then-popular Hereford bull WSF PRL Justa Banner. Because of Ken’s and Joe’s knowledge of Hereford cattle, they had no trouble remembering those letters even though they had nothing to do with the project.

“So that’s how Herefords got involved in stealth airplanes,” Ken jokes.

Switching gears

As is customary in the military, it wasn’t long before Ken moved again. In 1982 he left Virginia for California, and although he remained a partner in a few Herefords for a while and attended some national Hereford events, he gave up his farm.

While serving as wing commander at Edwards Air Force Base in California, Ken received some of the most exciting news of his life.

Ken reminisces with palpable emotion, “I was in D.C. when I found out; I had some business there. I had gone out that evening for a going away party for a general officer. When I

got back to my room there was a note on my door from the executive office of the 4-star commander. The note said basically, the boss wants to see you first thing in the morning. When I walked in he said, ‘In a couple hours it’s going to be official but you are on the BG (brigadier general) list.’

“It was a total surprise to me,” Ken says. “That was about 7:30 a.m. or so local time, so it would be 4:30 in the morning in California. But I walked out

of the office and called my wife and woke her up. It was a big deal. I was elated by it, but it’s humbling,” Ken recalls with tears in his eyes.

It certainly was a big deal. In order to be named a general, one must be chosen through a lengthy process. There is a board of general officers which meets once a year and reviews the records of all the colonels in the Air Force. The board submits a list of recommendations. Each person on the list, then, must be approved by the Secretary of Defense, the President and Congress. Extensive record checks are performed, and if no one in each of those offices is opposed, the President officially nominates each colonel and then Congress confirms him by name. That process was repeated when Ken was promoted to major general in 1989.

While Ken was earning new accolades, Herefords stayed in the back of his mind. In 1991 he bought a place in Missouri. Shortly after, he faced a tough decision and decided to retire from the military. He’d served 32 years, and although mandatory retirement isn’t until 35 years, Ken knew it was time.

“I came to a point where they wanted to transfer me to a job that I didn’t want,” Ken says. “I don’t mean this to say that I am disloyal or unpatriotic.”

He explains that it was a new position as part of a new plan that had come from Congress, and Ken was certain it wouldn’t be successful.

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"It was just not possible to do the right thing for the country, he says. "I examined my conscience about it. Even though my seniors wanted me to do it I decided I didn't. I felt there was absolutely no way that whomever had this job could do the right thing for the Air Force or the right thing for the nation."

So, he says, it was time to do something else.

"I was young enough that I could go do something else. I was in my early 50s. And I wanted to raise Hereford cattle. I already had in my mind what I wanted to do and I had a place to do it. It all fell in line and we decided now was time for a change."

Now, when a general retires, many private companies will often hire him as a consultant. Those offers were there, and they certainly would have been much more lucrative, but Ken had cattle on his brain.

The land he had bought in Missouri was a great location for cows. And when he moved there in 1992, that point was easily proved by the fact that there were 11 Angus seedstock operations within 20 miles of

his house. He had no interest in being the No. 12 Angus breeder there, especially because of his background in Herefords from his daughters' junior show days.

For the last 20 years, Ken has made quite a reputation for his polled Hereford genetics. He maintains a herd of about 60 cows. He is the sole employee of the farm with occasional help from his youngest daughter, Courtney Bramon, who lives nearby. Being the only laborer on the place limits the number of head he can raise, as he also grows enough feed and hay for his herd. He uses artificial insemination primarily and culls his bulls heavily before offering only the best by private treaty.

His cows are about two-thirds fall calvers with the remainder calving in the spring.

In what little spare time he has these days, he and Carol are great supporters of the Missouri Hereford Association (MHA).

In fact, the MHA honored Ken and Carol with its "Friend of the Association" honor, and in 2012 Ken was inducted into the MHA Hall of Fame.

Ken and Carol reside in a historic home, built in 1835, on Lilac Hill. It was so named by the original settler, and Ken says Lilac Hill Polled Herefords is a logical continuation of that tradition.

Its beautiful location has allowed them to host many memorable events at their farm, including both of their daughters' weddings.

Certified Hereford or home-raised Hereford beef is always on the menu, much to their guests' delight. Ken says they are proud to spread the word about the unique qualities of Hereford beef.

"They just rave that they've never had beef like that all their life," Ken says.

Carol enjoys these opportunities to use her entertaining skills — something she perfected by being a military wife. "Spouses in the military are the most underappreciated group of women in the world," Ken says.

"Military wives are like ranch wives, they do everything, and the operation won't work without them. They are tremendous moral support. When you are a commander in the Air Force you have to make a lot of important decisions. And I would talk about them with her and she always had an opinion and often it was different than mine. But I valued her input.

"We would have visitors, like the vice president," Ken adds, nonchalantly, "or the chief of staff to the Mexican Air Force and his entourage, or the head of Air Force came one time. And frankly we relied on our wives to handle the social end of things. And especially with international visitors, the social part is so important."

Fellow Missouri Hereford breeder and Ken and Carol's personal friend Jim Bellis says the Hereford industry is so lucky to have such a highly regarded man in its ranks.

Undoubtedly the Air Force greatly affected Ken's ability to succeed in the civilian world. And although Ken says he thinks his most formative years in terms of his personality were while he was at the Air Force Academy and the time he spent in combat, he says the military isn't for everyone.

"I think it's an individual decision," Ken says. "I have had a number of young people talk to me and I refuse to give them a yes or no answer. Instead, what I talk



Ken and Carol's historic home was built in 1835.

to them about are some of the factors that should go into that decision. (I tell them) some of the behaviors that are mandatory and some of the things that will happen so they have a more clear understanding. If that fits with your personality and fits with your goals, then great.”

It certainly was to this country’s advantage that Ken’s decision was

to join the Air Force, according to General Joe Ralston, Ken’s friend and former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO. “This nation owes a great deal to Ken. He is a man of extraordinary technical competence but even more importantly, great common sense,” General Ralston says.

Although Ken has traded in his military garb for jeans and a ball

cap, his service to his country is always in his heart. “Every day I put on that uniform it was to serve my nation,” Ken says with heartfelt emotion. “That was in my mind every day I wore it for more than 32 years. I came back to the civilian community, but I have the same allegiance to my country. You don’t just throw that allegiance away.” **HW**

Military biography: Kenneth E. Staten, major general, U.S. Air Force, retired

General Kenneth Staten was born July 13, 1939, in Manhattan, Kan., and graduated from Mulvane High School, Mulvane, Kan., in 1957. He received a bachelor of science degree in military science from the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1961 and a master of science degree in systems management from the University of Southern California in 1974. He completed Squadron Officers School in 1965, Armed Forces Staff College in 1974, and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces in 1982.

After graduating from the Academy, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Air Force. The general entered pilot training at Webb Air Force Base, Texas, was the top graduate of the first training class to fly the new T-38 trainer and received his pilot wings in August 1962. After completing combat crew training at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., in May 1963, he was assigned to the 493rd Tactical Fighter Squadron, 48th Tactical Fighter Wing, RAF Lakenheath, England, as an F-100 pilot. In May of 1966, he transferred to Beinh Hoa Air Base, Republic of Vietnam, and flew 265 combat missions as an F-100 pilot with the 510th Tactical Fighter Squadron, 3rd Tactical Fighter Wing.

In June 1967 General Staten returned to the United States as an F-100 combat crew training instructor with the 27th Tactical Fighter Wing, Cannon AFB, N.M. He completed the U.S. Air Force Aerospace Research Pilot School (now known as the Test Pilot School) at Edwards AFB, Calif., in February 1969 and remained there as an instructor.

General Staten became an aide to the Commander, Air Force Systems Command, Andrews AFB, Md., in January 1971. After graduating from the Armed Forces Staff College, Norfolk, Va., in January 1974, he entered F-4 upgrade training with the 35th Tactical Fighter Wing at George AFB, Calif.

In May 1974, he was assigned to the 4th Tactical Fighter Squadron, 432nd Tactical Fighter Wing, Udorn Royal Thai AFB, Thailand, as assistant operations officer and F-4 pilot. From June 1975 to July 1981, he served as fighter requirements officer, and later as special assistant to the deputy chief of staff for research and development

at Headquarters U.S. Air Force, Washington, D.C. During these assignments, General Staten was part of the cadre of five officers that initiated the low observables “stealth” programs. He was the first program manager of the F-117.

After completing the Industrial College of the Armed Forces in July 1982, the general was assigned to the U.S. Air Force Test Pilot School as Commandant. In August 1983, he became the commander of the 6510th Test Wing, Edwards AFB, Calif., where he was responsible for all flight test activities at the world’s largest flight test base. In February 1986, he was assigned as the first program manager of the National Aerospace Plane Joint Program Office at Wright-Patterson AFB, Ohio, which managed the technology and design programs for a hypersonic research vehicle (X-30).

In November 1987, the general was assigned to Hanscom AFB, Maine, as Deputy Commander for Tactical Systems, Joint Tactical Information Distribution System and Airborne Warning and Control Systems, Electronic Systems Division. He was responsible for developing and procuring command, control and communications systems for the U.S. and allied armed forces.

General Staten’s next position was commander of the Armament Division, Eglin AFB, Fla., which later became the Munitions Systems Division. The Munitions Systems Division conducted planning, research, development and acquisition for non-nuclear air armaments and munitions systems; completed test and evaluation of armament and electronic combat systems; and operated the largest Air Force base in the Free World.

He assumed his final active duty assignment in August 1991 as the deputy chief of staff for test and resources, Headquarters Air Force Systems Command, Andrews AFB, Md. Test and resources encompassed the functional areas of test and evaluation, logistics, manpower, services and civil engineering.

He was promoted to major general Sept. 1, 1989, and was retired from active duty on Sept. 1, 1992.

— *courtesy of General Ken Staten*

