



WILLIAM H. NELLIS (Class of 1937)

Born in Santa Rita, New Mexico, in 1916, The Nellis family moved to the town of Searchlight when William H. Nellis was a child. His father was a miner, and his grandmother ran a boarding house. He moved to Las Vegas as a teenager, and graduated from Las Vegas High School in 1937. Later he went to work for the railroad, as many local boys did in the years before World War II.

Before the railroad, Nellis worked at a service station for Berkeley Bunker. Bunker, a long time southern Nevada businessman, served in the Nevada assembly until Governor E.P. Carville appointed him to succeed Key Pittman in the U.S. Senate. He later served in the House of Representatives.

When World War II began, Nellis was married with two children. Even so, he knew he could not remain uninvolved. After seeing a newsreel about the Army Air Corps, he decided to enlist. Older than most enlistees, Nellis asked his former boss Bunker for support. Bunker wrote to the Air Corps in support of Nellis' application. Nellis was accepted and went on to become a fighter pilot, flying the P-47 Thunderbolt, or Jug, as many pilots knew it.

Nellis served in the Ninth Air Force, based initially in England, but moved to the mainland after D-Day. He flew sixty-nine missions over Europe and was shot down twice, surviving each crash and making his way back to Allied lines. He continued to volunteer to fly, doing what he saw as his duty for the great cause.

Nellis's last flight came on December 27, 1944, just before weather made further flying impossible.

During the Battle of the Bulge, Lieutenant Nellis was killed in action over Bastogne. He was flying with the 513th Fighter Squadron, 406 Fighter Group. His sacrifice made him a local hero.

Soon after the Las Vegas Air Force Base reopened in 1949, the Air Force began looking for a name for the new base. Las Vegas High School faculty and students felt that honoring a hero from southern Nevada was appropriate. They circulated petitions and wrote letters. On May 20, 1950, the base was named in honor of Lieutenant William H. Nellis. His name is appropriately carried today on the Air Force base that is "The home of the fighter pilot."

These biographies are based on research and could contain discrepancies.

If there are any excerpts you feel should be changed please feel free to contact me at Dave@lvhsaa.com

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