Hero who stirred up a hornets’ nest returns to base

BY ASHA MEHTA

A DECORATED US war veteran who flew on 52 war combat missions made an emotional return to his former RAF base near Peterborough.

Captain John Lee, a Second World War fighter pilot who was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and three battle stars, travelled from Texas to the old airfield at King's Cliffe where his 79th squadron, part of the 20th fighter group, were based.

Captain Lee (86) and his daughter Dotty also visited war graves at the American Cemetery at Madingley, in Cambridge, to pay their respects to his fallen comrades.

Capt Lee was invited for tea with Peterborough Mayor Councillor Keith Sharp yesterday and regaled him with amazing stories of his service. But after the meal, he told him he had served once before, in 1985 and he was “still remember a lot from it.”

Capt Lee said: “It’s important we don’t forget the sacrifices they made. Captain Lee is a real character and had a fantastic career.”

Capt Lee is currently writing a book about his incredible life story, which includes his part in the NASA space programme.

Handpicked by NASA

CAPTAIN Lee was one of 26 engineers hand-picked to develop the NASA space programme in the 1970s.

During his stellar 30-year career, his proudest moment came when he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom as part of the missions operations team supporting the Apollo 13 mission to the moon.

Former US president Richard Nixon said the support team performed "a miracle, transforming potential tragedy into one of the most dramatic rescues of all time.

"The skill, coordination and performance under pressure of the mission operations team made it happen."

Apollo 13 was the third Apollo mission intended to land on the moon.

The craft was launched on April 11, 1970, but the moon landing had to be aborted after an oxygen tank ruptured, damaging the craft’s electrical system.

This forced the crew to conserve batteries and oxygen needed for the last hours of flight and use the craft’s Lunar Module’s resources as a “lifeboat” during the return trip to Earth.

Despite great hardship caused by limited power, loss of cabin heat and shortage of potable water, the crew returned safely to Earth on April 17 and the mission was termed a “successful failure.”

Captain Lee said: “We told flight control from the Mission Evaluation Room what had happened to the space craft and how they could help it return. We got a medal for helping to save the mission, which was a highlight.”

REMARKABLE MAN

Second World War veteran John Lee; Above, a P51 D Mustang, similar to that flown by Captain John Lee, a Second World War fighter pilot who was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and three battle stars, travelled from Texas to the old airfield at King's Cliffe.