Friends, family members and base personnel wave goodbye Monday to A-10's leaving England Air Force Base.

**Piece of La. aviation history roars off to new home**

By The Associated Press

ALEXANDRIA — During a brief break in a series of thunderstorms, a piece of Louisiana’s aviation history roared off to a new home.

The historic 23rd Fighter Wing was decommissioned Monday as part of the process for closing England Air Force Base.

The flag of the 23rd left Monday aboard a thundering F-16 Falcon fighter bound to Pope Air Force Base in North Carolina.

The 23rd began as a private all-volunteer group of pilots under Louisiana native Claire Chennault fighting in Burma and China against the Japanese invasion before the United States entered World War II.

Its fighter planes were decorated with painted sharks teeth, which the Chinese interpreted as those of tigers — a symbol of courage. The name “Flying Tigers” stuck even after the volunteers were brought into the Air Corps on July 4, 1942.

The wing moved to England AFB in July 1972.

England is one of dozens of bases around the country being shut down under the Defense Base Closure and Realignment Act of 1990, and the Flying Tigers will be merged into a composite wing under the new Air Combat Command.

Eight A-10s left at England will be gone by June 15, and the base will be closed to air traffic July 10.

The wing was deactivated in a brief ceremony presided over by Lt. Gen. Chuck Horner, commander of the 9th Air Force.

Horner said that Alexandria and Pineville “will be changed forever” with departure of the Flying Tigers. “People will not remember what we said this morning, but so many men and women . . . came to serve this nation and in doing so became part of the community,” Horner said.

“It breaks my heart to see it close,” he said. On the other hand, Horner said, he is happy to see the 23rd remain on active duty.

Col. Dave Sawyer, who commanded the 23rd at England Air Force Base the last two years, including its tour of duty in Desert Storm, will command the new 623rd Wing — the remnants of the historic group left at England.

The 623rd has no mission and no history. It is not known how much longer Sawyer, who has been selected for promotion to brigadier general, will remain.

Sawyer said the air base is a first-class piece of property and said the England Authority, charged with finding economically beneficial re-use, is doing a good job.