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Ellsworth history being brought to life at book club meeting

PIERRE, S.D. – South Dakota West River and East River residents will have the opportunity to simultaneously learn about the history of Ellsworth Air Force Base at the January meeting of the History and Heritage Book Club.

Retired Air Force Lt. Col. George Larson of Rapid City will lead the discussion of his book “Thunder over Dakota: The Complete History of Ellsworth Air Force Base, South Dakota” at 7 p.m. CST (6 p.m. MST) on Tuesday, Jan. 14.

Larson will speak from Classroom Building Room 109 at the South Dakota School of Mines & Technology in Rapid City and be connected to the book club’s usual meeting site, the Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre, through the state’s Digital Dakota Network. Using the DDN will enable those in Rapid City and those in Pierre to see and speak to each other. The book club meeting is open to anyone, and people are welcome to join Larson at the School of Mines & Technology or come to the Cultural Heritage Center in order to participate in the discussion.

“Ellsworth Air Force Base has been defending the United State for more than 70 years. It has long been important to the history of South Dakota and the United States,” said South Dakota Historical Society Foundation President Michael Lewis. “We welcome the opportunity to have people from the Black Hills and from central South Dakota learn more about it.”

The foundation sponsors the History and Heritage Book Club. It is based at the Cultural Heritage Center and is the nonprofit fundraising partner of the South Dakota State Historical Society.

Larson, 67, started writing articles about the military after he retired from the Air Force in 1992. He has had more than 300 magazine articles and 10 books published.

“I was never stationed at Ellsworth, but I was asked to write a history of it (by then-base commander Col Edward Rice),” Larson said. “A lot of the history had never been told.”

Larson was given complete access to the air force base located near Box Elder, just east of Rapid City, when seeking information for what would become the nearly 300-page, 525-photograph book.

People might be surprised to learn that Ellsworth once housed a top-secret nuclear weapons storage facility, Larson said. They also might not realize that a section of the base contains a memorial park funded by the residents of Rapid City that honors aviators who lost their lives in performance of their duties while stationed at Ellsworth.

And people might not know that the base is named after Brig. Gen. Richard F. Ellsworth, the base's commander from 1950 until his death in a crash over Newfoundland in March 1953. President Dwight D. Eisenhower dedicated the newly-renamed Ellsworth Air Force Base in honor of its fallen leader on June 13, 1953.

"The most enjoyable aspect of this book was just finding information," Larson said.

"Thunder over Dakota" is available from the Heritage Stores at the Cultural Heritage Center and the Capitol in Pierre. Book club members receive a 10 percent discount, and South Dakota State Historical Society members receive an additional 5 percent discount, when they purchase the book club selection at either Heritage Store.

For more information about the book club meeting, call (605) 773-6006.

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The South Dakota State Historical Society is a division of the Department of Tourism. The Department of Tourism is comprised of Tourism, the South Dakota Arts Council and the State Historical Society. The Department is led by Secretary James D. Hagen. The State Historical Society, an Affiliate of the Smithsonian Institution, is headquartered at the South Dakota Cultural Heritage Center in Pierre. The center houses the society's world-class museum, the archives, and the historic preservation, publishing and administrative/development offices. Call (605) 773-3458 or visit www.history.sd.gov for more information. The society also has an archaeology office in Rapid City; call (605) 394-1936 for more information.