

Drone operations

Contrary to popular belief, most FSATs are flown manned, either for pilots to stay proficient on the aircraft or to develop certain test profiles. Many flights are categorized as so-called engineering tests, in which an actual test is performed as part of the test and evaluation program of a weapon, albeit without needing to actually fire a weapon at the drone. The FSAT then acts as a decoy, with or without any measures to counter the threat, like ECM or flares, depending on the customer's requirements. Further manned flights are undertaken when QF-4s are used as chase planes. In addition, the drones regularly need to be flown to allow the team of controllers to keep their proficiency. Det 1 has five controllers, all civilians and rated pilots under contract with Lockheed Martin. They are the people who actually fly the drone by remote control during a real live-firing test.

above: The ramp at Holloman that houses Detachment 1 of the 82nd ATRS contains QF-4s in various markings — those with the traditional red fins of full-size aerial targets (and even then there are variations between individual airframes) and the three jets that received historic liveries in 2004 as part of the USAF Heritage Flight program, two of which are in the line-up on the right.

right: The view from inside the drone operator's Mobile Control System van alongside the 'droneway' at Holloman, as two QF-4Es are prepared for a launch.

