

Nighthawks in use until systems like the F-22 Raptor and JASSM can accomplish with certainty what the F-117 has already done in combat: penetrate heavily-defended airspace, survive in it, and knock out high-value targets.

A month later, Congress voted to halt the proposed retirement, which will save \$2.6bn by 2011; the accelerated retirement of the F-117 would have saved \$1bn by that date. It now allows the USAF to retire only 10 Nighthawks before 2008, while all retired aircraft are to be preserved for possible future operations.

Nonetheless, the F-117 'schoolhouse' and the only unit responsible for F-117 operational test and evaluation have already been closed. Both based at Holloman, the 7th Fighter Squadron had its closing ceremony on December 15, 2006 and was inactivated on December 31. Detachment 1, 53rd Test and Evaluation Group was deactivated three months earlier, on October 1.

Stealth School

The primary mission of the 7th FS was to train incoming F-117 pilots, teaching them the basics of mission planning, target acquisition, target tracking and weapon delivery. At the same time, the squadron also had to maintain combat readiness, with every single instructor pilot actually being prepared to be 'plugged in' to one of the 49th Fighter Wing's two operational squadrons, the 8th or 9th Fighter Squadrons, to go to war at any time.

The last F-117 transition class ended when Col David Goldfein (the 49th FW commander), Lt Col Peter York, Maj Robert Noonan, Capt Nathan Keethler and Capt Michael Harmon all graduated on October 13, 2006. In addition, Col David Moore, the 49th FW's vice-commander, was re-qualified. Col Goldfein was not only a graduate of the final class, but he also received 'Bandit' number 708, the last person to receive this title. Upon their first Nighthawk flight, every student would be given a 'Bandit' number, stemming from the days when the F-117 Formal Training Unit (FTU) was the 417th Fighter Squadron, known as the 'Bandits'.

right: F-117s shelter from the New Mexico sun under Holloman's specially-designed and built 'canyons'. (Richard Cooper)

below: The 49th FW's T-38As are the only Talons in the USAF inventory to have received this gloss black scheme.



Using this nickname, Nighthawk pilots could talk about the aircraft without making any reference to the classified program.

After the 7th FS became the F-117 FTU, a total of 273 pilots were trained (either for transition or re-qualification purposes) by the unit. After it was deactivated on December 31, the 8th FS took over the wing's T-38A program for flight evaluations, chasing specific F-117A upgrade test flights and various other missions. A total of 14 gloss black Talons are assigned to the 49th FW and are pooled between its constituent units.



Dragon Test Team

Being a tenant unit of the 49th FW, Detachment 1, 53rd Test and Evaluation Group, better known as the Dragon Test Team, has been the sole Operational Test and Evaluation (OT&E) unit supporting the

above: F-117A 85-0835 was the last 'Dragon' jet, this being the name given to the Nighthawks used by Detachment 1 of the 53rd Test and Evaluation Group. The gray livery was applied in early 2006 for tactical delivery, as the USAF looked at ways to better employ the F-117 at times other than during the night.

F-117 program. It managed and executed OT&E projects as directed first by Tactical Air Command (TAC) and later Air Combat Command (ACC) headquarters.

This included survivability and tactics development and evaluation programs for F-117 hardware, software and weapon upgrades. The unit also provided tactical and technical expertise to the USAF, DoD and the aerospace industry regarding the F-117 and future low-observable concept development and employment techniques. Over the years, more than 100 test projects were planned, executed and reported.

The origins of the Dragon Test Team name can be traced back to 1982 when test pilot Pete Barnes ('Bandit 110') was scheduled to make his first F-117A flight on July 9, 1982 in aircraft 80-0787. Inspired by Disney's 1977 movie Pete's Dragon, a green dragon was painted on the side of the aircraft, as the Stealth Fighter was like the dragon in the movie in being invisible. Consequently, this particular jet became known as 'The Dragon', while the USAF personnel involved in the Follow-On Test and Evaluation (FOT&E) program began calling themselves the Dragon Test Team.

