

Special Report



The main assets of the 7th Fighter Squadron comprised a fleet of six F-117A Nighthawks, each wearing the blue squadron fin flash. The 7th also managed the T-38 programme at Holloman, although the 14 unique glass black-painted Talons are actually assigned to the 49th Fighter Wing. The Talons were then pooled between the 7th, 8th and 9th Fighter Squadrons, the 53d Wing's Detachment 1 – 53d Test and Evaluation Group, and the 57th Wing's Weapon School, all based at Holloman AFB.

On 1 October 1996, the Dragon Test Team became Detachment 1, 57th Test Group and was placed under the 53d Wing. On 14 April 1997 the unit changed name again to become Detachment 1, 79th Test & Evaluation Group, 53d Wing, replacing its 'WA' tail code with 'OT' (for 'Operational Test'). On 20 November 1998 the unit was renamed for the last time to become Detachment 1, 53d Test & Evaluation Group, 53d Wing, the name it carried until its deactivation.

In September 2003, former naval aviator Lieutenant Colonel Richard J. Silong received his orders to report to Detachment 1, 53d Test and Evaluation Group of the 53d Wing to become the assistant director of operation (ADO). He assumed command of the Detachment on 22 April 2005, becoming the fourteenth, and last commander of the Detachment since its activation.

F-117 OT&E

Since its creation, Detachment 1 has taken what was developed at the Lockheed-Martin facility in Palmdale, California, to test it at the operational

level to ensure that new equipment, weapons and software are compatible with operational constraints. As Lieutenant Colonel Silong explains: "With 24 years of service, the Dragon Test Team has been involved in all the F-117 modifications and upgrades. Its mission is to maximise the Air Force's and F-117's combat capabilities by conducting operational test and evaluation tactics, development and evaluation for military exploitations, force development and evaluation, and maintainability testing. This includes ground and open-range testing, as well as every mission planning release that has been given to the Warfighters".

The Dragon Test Team was one of the first organisations in the Air Force to be part of a Combined Developmental Test and Operational Test effort performing end-to-end testing. It was directly involved in the entire test cycle of the different developments, modifications and upgrades, and in that sense was responsible for actually expediting new concepts to the Warfighter itself. By working hand-in-hand with the Developmental Test organisation (F-117

Combined Test Force – 410th Flight Test Squadron) and contractors, this combined effort resulted in modifications getting fielded quickly to the operational units. All relevant parties were directly involved in every stage of the process, from the early design phase all the way through to actually fielding the modification or upgrade, and sometimes even for post-implementation analysis. By this method the Air Force was able to save valuable time and money. In the meantime, many other test organisations followed this example.

The 'Dragon' and any other operational F-117 that was used for testing could be fitted with an instrumentation package called the Low Observable Instrumentation System (LOIS), basically a black box with magnetic tape inside designed for the aircraft to read and record information from the MIL-STD-1553 databases and certain parameters from the aircraft weapons computer. This data was then used to verify some of the profiles that were flown.

Only some of the Palmdale DT aircraft were fully instrumented and had the typical orange (non-standard) wiring, thereby giving up some space in the weapon bay. Consequently the 'Dragon' remained 100 percent representative of the operational fleet in terms of LO signature and weapons capability.

Until December 2003, the 'Dragon' had always been in the same black colour scheme as any other