



left: F-117A 85-0819 of the 8th FS, the 'Black Sheep', on finals to its sprawling home base.

(Don Logan)



thanks to Det 1's efforts, one developmental test F-117 at Palmdale has been modified with the LO Dual Radio and SATCOM to evaluate the package, so future projects may benefit.

Additional cancelled test plans included the integration of the Wind Corrected Munitions Dispenser (WCMD), an off-the-shelf weapon that would allow Nighthawk pilots to independently target weapons and strike multiple targets on a single release or pass. WCMD was scheduled to be fielded in August 2006. The F-117 would have carried two dispensers. Det 1 also pushed to integrate the Small Diameter Bomb (SDB), enabling the Nighthawk to defeat eight and possibly 16 targets. A load-out of four SDBs per weapon bay had already been demonstrated. Plans were also drawn up to integrate the 500lb GBU-38 JDAM, increasing the number of GPS-guided bombs carried to four per aircraft. This was halted too.

A new mission tactics development that was scheduled for FY06 was called F-117 Non-Traditional Intelligence, Surveillance & Reconnaissance (NTISR) TD&E. This would tie in the new communications suite and the datalink with all the results already obtained from projects like TST, NTISR, Advanced Threat Defeat, NVIS, Global Strike with the Raptors, OPF-87 with the smart weapons integration, and combine them with the improvements made to the IRADS system and other classified projects.

Det 1 requested additional modifications to be made to the IRADS that would allow the pilot to send real-time high-definition still pictures or streaming video over a safe communication network back to the CAOC. Currently, the Nighthawk is the only LO aircraft in the USAF's inventory that can put 'eyes' on a target, thanks to IRADS. The Nighthawk would then be fully integrated in a network-centric combat environment with beyond line of sight, reach-back and TST capabilities, providing the combatant commanders with a single LO platform capable of sending highly detailed live pictures of a target, with deep strike capabilities, with the right tools to destroy (extremely accurately) that target, which can re-target on

the spot when requested or continue to gather real-time battlefield intelligence.

According to Lt Col Richard J. Silong, the last commander of the Dragon Test Team: 'This is what the Nighthawk needed. With this package, you change the entire tactics and employability of this aircraft as you can strike deeper, do re-targeting, provide real-time battlefield intelligence and acquire and destroy time-sensitive targets while remaining stealthy. You would basically have a whole new aircraft that has unprecedented capabilities. We are talking a whole new future based on a platform that is combat-proven. Right now, there is no other operational platform that can offer that.'

### End of an era

First indications of a possible close-down for the F-117 fleet emerged during the first two months of 2006. This was firmer up in March 2006, when ACC put a timeline on the closure and planning to deactivate Det 1 started. Prior to shutting its doors, the Dragon Test Team operated entirely autonomously and had a complete com-

plement of staff, including four pilots, an electronic warfare officer, an active duty analyst, a civilian analyst and its own life-support section.

Records show that more OT&E testing has been completed and fielded to the warfighters during the last three years than any period before, providing them with the F-117's best capabilities ever with a lot more in the pipeline. Had some of the aforementioned developments and capabilities been pushed for earlier on, the decision to retire the F-117 could have looked different.

On September 14, 2006, the 'Dragon' made its last flight. It is part of the first lot of 10 aircraft coded for retirement; a replacement had been found in serial 84-0824, which was to have been given the same modifications as 85-0835 including LO Dual Radio, SATCOM and Link 16, but when the decision to deactivate the unit became known, this was cancelled and the jet is now part of the operational wing.

The deactivation ceremony took place at Holloman on September 15, in the presence of some 500 invitees. Det 1 was

**A unique shape — but the first operational stealth aircraft is now destined for retirement, a decision that's been the cause of much debate.** (Richard Cooper)

