



officially inactivated on October 1; its facilities have been taken over by the Integration Office housing the team that will draw down the F-117 and integrate the F-22 into the 49th FW.

And the Nighthawk? It is evident that the potential of the F-117 will not be further explored nor exploited, and funding to get new capabilities to the operational fleet with the 8th and 9th Fighter Squadrons is limited or being re-directed in favor of other platforms. One thing the Nighthawk will always be remembered for is the fact that it revolutionized modern air warfare and as such has set the benchmark for any existing or future platform. That is something the Dragon Test Team can take credit for.

Nighthawk's future

By the end of December 2006, five F-117s had been coded for retirement. Per quarter, the 49th FW will now retire one, then two and then two more jets to meet the required 10 by the end of 2007. Under Program Budget Decision 720, the wing has its orders to prepare the entire fleet for retirement by the end of FY08, while it is planning to receive the first HO-tailed F-22s in the first quarter of FY09. Although Congress has authorized the purchase of 183 Raptors, 49th FW commander Brig Gen David Goldfein said at the 7th FS

deactivation ceremony that Holloman is expecting 36 of the 183 Raptors currently on order, but that if more are built, the 49th FW will reactivate the 7th FS and host three squadrons of Raptors instead of two. The disposition of the retired F-117s is yet to be announced.

Until that time, the Lockheed Martin Corporation will continue to support the aircraft under the Total System Performance Partnership (TSSP) II program. On September 29, 2006, the company received a follow-on contract worth \$1.4bn for this. Lockheed Martin could be tasked in the extra work years beyond FY08 to 'accommodate possible retirement tasks' as the F-117 is the first low-observable aircraft to go into retirement, presenting unique challenges. However, if the Nighthawk fleet flies for longer, TSSP II can include 'an extension of support' by Lockheed Martin through FY11. Making Lockheed Martin accountable in this way challenges the company to provide support to the 49th FW that is 'equal to or better than' current levels while reducing total ownership cost to the USAF.

The same day this important contract was signed, a vast crowd gathered to commemorate 25 years of Nighthawk history at the Silver Stealth ceremony at Holloman, where a formation of 25 aircraft

made a unique flyby, symbolizing this milestone. But yet another milestone was reached around this date, as from September 28-October 1, 2006, the entire F-117 fleet at Holloman was 100 per cent mission-capable.

This is unique for any squadron, and it was the first time in known history that the F-117 had been totally mission-capable for four consecutive days — the type had only achieved this for one day maybe twice since its declassification. This demonstrated the excellent co-operation between the military maintenance people at Holloman and those from Lockheed Martin.

As Brig Gen David Goldfein, the 49th FW's commander, underlined in his silver jubilee speech: 'The F-117A fleet is full-up for any contingency until it is completely retired, and I believe our readiness was demonstrated today by putting half our fleet in the air, with the remaining being 100 per cent mission-capable. This is a clear testament to our capabilities. While 'Silver Stealth' is a culmination of 25 years, the F-117A mission still continues on. We have not been relieved of our combat tasking.'

A clearer statement could not have been made — the Nighthawk continues to be a national strategic asset to the president and his combatant commanders, at least for today and a few more years to come. □