

A QF-4E undergoes checks on the taxiway at Holloman. The view highlights the antennas added by the drone conversion, notably the bulge on the aircraft's spine and the antennas on the top and rear of the fin tip. The 82nd ATRG Det 1 is assigned its own tailcode ('HD' = 'Holloman Drone').



on 18 December 1996. At any time it has between 15 and 24 aircraft in its inventory, depending on the requirement of the many Operational Test and Evaluation (OT&E) and Developmental Test and Evaluation (DT&E) programmes being run. Unlike the 82nd's element at Tyndall, Det 1 does not operate any of the sub-scale aerial targets (SSAT), as at the WSMR these are employed by the US Army.

Since 2 December 2003, Det 1 has been commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Charles 'Tuna' Hainline, the 13th commander since Lt Col Miles Dwight took the helm in 1981. Hainline's career has taken in the A-10, F-117 (including combat over Kosovo), spells as an instructor in the T-38, F-117 and F-4, and a Navy F/A-18 tour in which he became a 101-trap 'centurion'. Hainline is one of two active-duty pilots, the other military pilot being Major John 'Shamu' Markle, previously flying F-117s and F-111s, and now Det 1's operations officer.

Apart from the commander and his operations officer, the other military personnel attached to the unit form a small team of enlisted supply, avionics and crew chief specialists. All remaining Det 1 personnel are civilians provided under contract by Lockheed Martin. Most are retired air force personnel.

Civilian contractors have been involved since the beginning of drone operations, and today Lockheed Martin is responsible for the mission-readiness of the aircraft, maintenance and the provision of pilots and operators to remotely control the aircraft. Lockheed Martin supplies the two civilian pilots attached to Det 1, Jeff Ault and Mark Perkins. Jeff Ault was a T-38

instructor before flying F-4s, accumulating close to 3,000 hours on the Phantom. Mark Perkins flew T-33s and then F-106s before his retirement. As a contractor he then flew the E-9 at Tyndall for several years and when he was transferred to Holloman, he got checked out to fly the Phantom. Right now the four pilots of Det 1 all fly twice a week on average.

Maintenance team

Det 1 manages all the operations of the QF-4 fleet as part of the Operations & Maintenance corporate contract between the USAF and Lockheed Martin, thereby monitoring the level of performance of the contractors at the unit level. Looked at from this perspective, commanding a unit like Det 1 is like running a business. A total of 26 people is attached to the unit, of which 12 are technicians responsible to keep Det 1's fleet of 15/24 aircraft working. Based on the number of missions that the unit flies, in an equivalent active-duty unit the number of maintenance personnel per aircraft would probably be five times as many.

As Colonel Hainline underlines: "At Holloman, there simply is a lot of pride. All are extremely experienced and very mission-oriented, focused. There's very little these people have not seen before. From experience

they know how to tackle a problem and do so with great speed and quality. The aircraft that we need is almost always there. If there is a problem, it immediately gets fixed. There is very little downtime. For all those who have not had the privilege to work with a dedicated team as we have here at Holloman, you may think that an F-4 is an F-4, with all its typical (mainly hydraulic) oddities – or shall we say challenges. Coming from my previous assignment with the 20th FS, where I accumulated some 300 hours flying the F-4E, I thought it was just a fact of life. But not here at Det 1. Here I am 95 per cent of the time code 1, meaning the jet is Crew-Ready, which is a testament to the mechanics. It is a real joy working with them."

The current contract with Lockheed Martin stipulates the aircraft to be crew-ready for a total of 400 manned flights per year. Under the same contract, some 12 NULLOs are scheduled (those missions where the aircraft is flown without a pilot and actually is getting shot at). In 2004, Det 1 made 380 sorties and eight NULLOs (unmanned) in which one aircraft was actually shot down.

A quarterly review takes place, measuring performance against the contract goals. One of the most important criteria is the number of maintenance aborts resulting in non-delivers.

Three QF-4Es are checked out before a mission. Holloman's drone operations are mainly flown in support of ground-based air defence systems, whereas those at Tyndall are primarily flown against air- or sea-based defence systems.

