



*Above: Although mainly used for ground-based SAM tests, the mountainous terrain of the White Sands range provides a challenging environment for air-to-air missile tests and operational assessments.*

The US Navy requirement is new and stems from the fact that, after nearly 45 years of operations, the US Navy finally retired its last 12 drone aircraft assigned to VX-30 'Bloodhounds' at Naval Station Point Mugu in 2004. Anticipating this retirement, in 2003 a Memorandum of Agreement was signed between the USAF and Navy to coordinate the use of Air Force QF-4s for Naval Test & Evaluation purposes.

However, although in many cases a Kill Authorization does not necessarily mean an expenditure (write-off of the aircraft), the Test & Evaluation branch of the Air Force estimates the expenditure of FSATs to increase to the point that they balance the number of drone conversions. This is primarily due to increased missile lethality (AIM-9X and AMRAAM with close to 100 per cent kill rates), as well as the aforementioned additional requirements of the Navy. The challenge is to keep the inventory at such levels that both Air Force and Navy

*Right: Most conversions now are of the QF-4E version, with its slatted wing. The projection forward of the port leading edge formerly housed the ASX-1 TISEO TV target acquisition and tracking system.*

requirements can be met. The latest estimate is that the last QF-4s will be delivered for service around July 2012.

As the relative 'younger' F-4G-models have been used up, conversion continues using the many stored E-models, and once more some RF-4Cs will be included in the programme. At the time of writing, two RF-4s are included in the next lot for conversion and are being prepared at the AMARC.

Some concerns exist about logistics, as there are some differences in parts compared to the current E and G-models in use. On the other hand, the recce Rhinos have some advantages, as they are actually lighter, faster and fitted with a so-called hard wing, meaning no slats. This makes a big difference aerodynamically as it is much cleaner. Once these aircraft are pushed to get above Mach 1.5, then the hard wing really shines. For high-speed trials new possibilities may arise. It will be around 2007 before the QRF-4s are delivered for operational use.



As a replacement for the QF-4, the different services have expressed the need for an Air Superiority Target (AST) that is a more current, threat-representative and capable target. Alternatives have been studied, but currently not many potential aircraft exist that would fit the role and eventually replace the QF-4. Rumours say that the F-16 is being considered and the ones already in the honeyard are 'fenced', meaning that they are not to be used for other purposes until a final decision is made regarding whether they fit the QF role. An alternative may be to use purpose-built full-scale targets.

### Heritage Flight

For the next few years, the F-4 will therefore remain a familiar sight around Holloman and Tyndall, and the general public is also being offered the opportunity to see the Phantom in all its splendour during various air shows across the United States. Six QF-4s have been painted in special colour schemes and are scheduled to perform at various shows as part of the USAF Heritage Flight programme around the country.

The USAF Heritage Flight was established in 1997 in support of the Air Force's 50th anniversary and until today its mission has been to safely and proudly display the evolution of United States Air Force airpower and to support the Air Force's recruiting and retention efforts. It basically consists of vintage World War II and Korean War-era aircraft flying in close formation with the ACC Single-Ship Demonstration Teams.

Only 18 men are allowed in this programme by Air Force regulation, and the modern Air Force fighters are piloted by the six Air Combat Command single-ship demonstration team

*Over 220 Phantoms have been converted for the USAF's drone programme, including all available F-4G Wild Weasels. The present QF-4 conversion programme will ensure that the Phantom does not disappear from US skies until some time after 2012, by which time the 'Double Ugly' will have racked up 51 years of US military service.*