

SPECIAL REPORT



Nighthawk Sunset

The beginning of the end for the F-117

By the end of 2008 the US Air Force is due to have completely withdrawn the F-117 'stealth fighter' from service. The process began in late 2006 with the retirement of the first airframes and the deactivation of two units that specialised in training and test.

Officially, the US Air Force characterises the F-117 as "the world's first operational aircraft designed to exploit low observable stealth technology". The Lockheed Martin F-117 Nighthawk made its first flight on 18 June 1981 and, after the stealth programme was declassified in November 1988, the first warplanes were deployed in combat over Panama in December 1989. Fifty-nine production models were built, with the last rolling off the line at Lockheed's plant at Palmdale, California, on 12 July 1990.

In the Persian Gulf War in 1991, 42 F-117As bolstered the allied effort against Iraq, being the first aircraft to take out targets within the city limits of Baghdad. After Desert Storm, the 37th Tactical Fighter Wing at Tonopah was deactivated when the entire fleet of Nighthawks relocated to the 49th Fighter Wing at Holloman AFB, New Mexico, with the official arrival ceremony being held on 9 May 1992. Seven were destroyed in crashes, including one that was lost in combat over Yugoslavia on 27 March 1999, in the Kosovo war effort. The entire operational fleet of 50 Nighthawks is based at Holloman Air Force Base near Alamogordo, New Mexico, while two are

assigned to Air Force test squadrons.

In late December 2005, the Air Force submitted its Program Budget Decision 720, also known as the Air Force Transformation Flight Plan (AFTFP). This outlined the service's plan to retire older aircraft aggressively, thereby saving more than \$2.6 billion between 2007 and 2011. The money would be directed into programmes that should make the Air Force a "more lethal, more agile, streamlined force with an increased emphasis on the Warfighter".

Under PBD 720, the Air Force proposed to retire the entire F-117 Nighthawk fleet of 52 aircraft by 2008, reduce the fleet of B-52 bombers from 94 to 56, retire all of the 34 U-2 reconnaissance aircraft, and send 78 KC-135E tankers into the boneyard, while increasing its fleet of F-22 Raptors from 179 to 183 aircraft. By phasing out the F-117s, the Air Force could apply the funds that it otherwise would have spent on the Nighthawks to more modern penetrating strike capabilities such as the Northrop Grumman B-2A Spirit stealth bomber, the F-22 Raptor stealth multi-role fighter aircraft and AGM-158 Joint Air-to-Surface Missile (JASSM).

The reason for bringing forward the retirement date from 2011 to 2008 was that the F-117A has become too expensive and difficult to maintain. However, since the Air Force submitted this plan, it has indicated that it may retain the Nighthawks for a while longer, at the request of combat commanders who have voiced concerns over an interim capability gap during the proposed schedule of the F-117 phase-out.

In April 2006, Air Force Chief of Staff General T. Michael Moseley stated that the service is working on a revamped timeline to keep the Nighthawks in service until systems such as the Raptor and JASSM can accomplish with certainty what the F-117 has already proven in combat: penetrate heavily defended airspace, survive in it, and knock out high-value targets. General Moseley commented: "I don't want to let go of the 117 until we have the capability demonstrated and operational with the 22", noting the service's comfort level with operating the Nighthawk today. "This is a prudent approach," the general continued. "It is that rule of wing-walking. Don't let go of one strut until you have got the other strut well in hand."

A month later, Congress voted to halt the proposed retirement of dozens of aircraft, which would have saved \$2.6 billion by 2011. The accelerated retirement of the F-117 would have saved \$1 billion by that date. Congress rejected this retirement plan as this could leave the service with