



Above and left: For 25 years the F-117 has been blazing the trail of stealth operations. Despite its aerodynamics being seriously compromised by the over-aggressive need to reduce radar cross-section, the aircraft is quite manoeuvrable and can be flown quite aggressively by an experienced pilot. The F-38 companion trainer is nimble enough to keep up with the Nighthawk throughout training sorties.



Force, and Iraqi and Enduring Freedom – the first lot of aircraft that “reshaped the way the United States Air Force looked at strategic warfare” has been announced for retirement. By the end of December 2006, five F-117s will be coded for retirement. Then the 49th Fighter Wing will retire – by quarter-year – one, then two and then two more to meet the required 10 by the end of 2007. As a consequence, two units – the F-117 ‘schoolhouse’ and the only unit responsible for F-117 Operational Test and Evaluation – have already been deactivated.

Based at Holloman AFB, the 7th Fighter Squadron had its closing ceremony on 15 December 2006, prior to inactivation on 31 December. Detachment 1, 53d Test and Evaluation Group, was inactivated three months earlier, on 1 October 2006.

The remaining 49th FW F-117s will be coded for retirement by the close of 2008, with their retirement set around the same time as the F-22 Raptor becomes fully operational at Holloman. The F-22 is set to continue the fight that the Nighthawk started, which, according to retired General Lloyd ‘Fig’ Newton, one of the first

F-117 pilots, is a hard job to fill. “Whenever its nation called, the F-117 answered, providing capabilities that had never been known before. If we needed the door kicked in, the Stealth was the one to do it. Never before had such an aircraft existed.”

Stealth school

For the last 14 years the responsibility for training new F-117 pilots fell to the 7th Fighter Squadron. Back in the very early ‘black-era’ days at Tonopah Test Range airfield, those aviators that were handpicked to fly the F-117 with the 4450th Tactical Group were first sent to Tucson International Airport, where the 162nd Tactical Fighter Group (Air National Guard) trained A-7 pilots. By then the 4450th TG was the only active-duty USAF unit still using the A-7 and, because of the tight restrictions on F-117A flights, this surrogate aircraft was needed for training and practice purposes, and to provide a cover story for the

This four-ship comprises the commander’s aircraft from the parent 49th Operations Group, plus the constituent 7th FS ‘Screaming Demons’, 8th FS ‘Black Sheep’ and 9th FS ‘Flying Knights’.

major holes in its fleet. It now allows the Air Force to retire only 10 Nighthawks before 2008, while all retired aircraft are to be preserved for possible future operations.

So, after 25 years of sterling service – in which the F-117A Nighthawk saw action over Panama, Bosnia, Afghanistan and Iraq as part of operations such as Just Cause, Desert Storm, Allied

