

Special Report



Above and right: The last F-117 transition class ended when Colonel David Goldfein (49th Fighter Wing commander), Lieutenant Colonel Peter York (49th FW), Major Robert Noonan (7th FS), Captain Nathan Keethler (7th FS), and Captain Michael Harmon (7th FS) all graduated on 13 October 2006. In addition, Colonel David Moore, 49th Fighter Wing vice commander, was re-qualified during this final course. Coincidentally, the wing commander not only was a graduate of the final class of the FTU, he also received Bandit number 708, the last Bandit.



unit's existence. In January 1989, just three months after the USAF admitted the F-117A's existence, the old A-7s at Tonopah were replaced with newer T-38A and AT-38B Talon trainers.

By the time that F-117 operations transferred to Holloman, training was being undertaken by the 417th FS. This unit renumbered as the 7th FS on 2 December 1993. On 17 June 1999 the 7th Fighter Squadron 'Scream'n Demons' assumed all F-117 training duties to become the 7th Combat Training Squadron (CTS). In addition to the previous duties of simulator training and initial F-117A pilot certification, the 7th took over the academic training for the F-117A, previously handled by the 49th Training Squadron (TRS). The inactivation of the 49th TRS and subsequent merging of people and assets from both squadrons represented the conclusion of the Quadrennial Defense Review action announced two years earlier.

While the 7th maintained its mission it transferred its seven F-117s to the 9th FS, leaving the unit without any aircraft. On 22 July 2005 the squadron once more became the 7th Fighter Squadron after squadron CO Lieutenant Colonel Knechans successfully issued a Change Request to

regain fighter squadron status and its aircraft. Lieutenant Colonel Knechans explains: "Being a fighter squadron is a part of our heritage. Also, the unit acts, looks and trains like a fighter squadron and, last but not least, it was important for the esprit-de-corps." With the support of the wing leadership, the request was sent up to Air Combat Command headquarters that coordinated it throughout the HQ staff. Once approved by the ACC Commander, the order went on to Headquarters Air Force, where it was finally signed, seven months after the colonel started the process.

F-117 Formal Training Unit

Before its deactivation the primary mission of the 7th Fighter Squadron was to train new F-117 pilots, teaching them the basics of mission planning, target acquisition, target tracking and weapons delivery. Shortly before the unit's deactivation Lieutenant Colonel Knechans explained: "We teach transition and re-qualification courses instead of a basic course, as all our trainees are experienced fighter pilots and our graduates are weapons-qualified aircraft commanders. At the

same time, the squadron also has to maintain its combat readiness, with every single instructor pilot actually being mobile and combat-ready – to be plugged into the 8th or 9th Fighter Squadron to go to war at any time."

To illustrate the importance of this secondary mission, an instructor pilot of the 7th piloted one of the F-117s during the opening decapitation strike of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

A third mission of the squadron was to train the cadre of instructor pilots who, in turn, would be training the incoming pilots. The fourth mission of the 7th was to manage the T-38 programme at Holloman, but contrary to popular belief, the 7th Fighter Squadron was not a T-38 squadron.

A total of 14 of these unique glossy-black-painted Talons is assigned to the 49th Fighter Wing. They were pooled between the 7th, 8th and 9th Fighter Squadrons, the 53d Wing with Detachment 1/53d Test and Evaluation Group, and the 57th Wing with its Weapon School. All were based at Holloman AFB.

The 7th, however, managed the use of these assets. This relatively large number of Talons was

