

Special Report



Without a two-seat trainer version available, conversion to the F-117 required a chase aircraft, the T-38 being an obvious choice. Prospective F-117 pilots also got to know the local area in a T-38 before their first solo in the Nighthawk.

part of the course, the students entered the Air Refuelling (AR) phase. Here Track I and II pilots completed a minimum of one instructor-supervised day air-refuelling mission, taking fuel from a KC-135 or KC-10, while Track IA pilots completed a minimum of two IP-supervised day air refuelling sorties. To complete the air refuelling phase, each student pilot had to successfully hook up and either take on fuel or maintain contact with the refuelling boom for a minimum of one minute. It was the only time during the course that the student pilots were chased by another F-117A flown by the instructor pilot.

The course then entered its last stage on day 46, when the first mission of the Surface Attack (SA) phase was accomplished. Consisting of five sub-phases, the student learned to employ the aircraft sensors, make use of different techniques and modes, and how to actually prosecute the target. This was the first time that the students pilot used the aircraft as a weapons platform, gradually gain-

ing proficiency in route navigation and level we apns delivery. Offset, Downward Looking Infrared (DLIR), Color Multipurpose Display Indicator (CMDI), Inertial (INS) and Dual-door attack procedures were introduced, as were back-up attack and heavyweight weapons delivery procedures. For these Surface Attack missions the F-117A was loaded with three to six BDU-33s on one or two SUU-20 practice bomb dispenser. A T-38 flew chase on these sorties.

On day 51, during the fourth Surface Attack sortie (SA-4), the student dropped a single GBU-12 to gain familiarity with heavyweight weapons, as well as showing proficiency in navigation and level weapons by dropping three BDU-33s. In total, each Track I or IA pilot dropped 24 BDU-33s and one GBU-12, while Track II students dropped 18 BDU-33s and a single GBU-12. The Surface Attack phase was completed on day 52, the last day of the course.

Final class

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.

All Bandits are given a number upon their first flight and, in accordance with this tradition, wing commander Colonel Goldfein (now Brigadier General) received his number on his first flight when he flew the F-117A on 14 September 2006. The first operational Air Force pilot to fly solo on the Nighthawk was Colonel (ret.) Alton C. Whitley as he received Bandit number 150 when he made his flight on 15 October 1982. The first 149 Bandit numbers were reserved for Test Program pilots from Lockheed Advanced Development Projects or the Air Force only.

On the eve of the 7th's disbandment, Colonel Knechans explained the reason, "The FTU's mission is to produce qualified pilots to offset permanent change of station (PCS) attrition and sustain combat capabilities. The FTU is deactivating because its mission is complete, as there are enough qualified and experienced F-117A pilots to do the mission until the retirement of the F-117A."

Since the squadron became the F-117 FTU, a total of 273 pilots (Transition/Requalification) was trained by the 7th Combat Training Squadron and 7th Fighter Squadron. On 15 December 2006, a closing ceremony was held at Holloman AFB and the long history of the 7th Fighter Squadron finally came to an end when the unit officially deactivated on 31 December 2006. The 8th Fighter Squadron took over the wing's T-38A programme for flight evaluations, to chase specific F-117A upgrades and other various missions. The 7th Fighter Squadron does have the opportunity

F-117s usually fly alone, so a four-ship formation like this is a rarity. Two of the four have the retractable communications blade antenna raised, located to the left of the spine.

