

Tyndall Air Force Base



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F-4 continues long-time service to Air Force with new mission

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by Senior Airman Kirsten Wicker
325th Fighter Wing Public Affairs

1/7/2011 - **TYNDALL AIR FORCE BASE, Fla.** -- The 82nd Aerial Target Squadron here is replacing the use of Lear jets for their banner tow missions with the F-4 Phantom, creating an air-to-air target that aircrews in training can use to safely evaluate, develop and test their weapons systems.

"We developed the idea to use the F-4 for the banner tow missions to ensure our combat fighter aircrews could continue training and developing their aerial gunnery skills," said Lt. Col. Ryan Luchsinger, 82nd ATRS commander. "Due to costs, the Navy contract for use of the Lear jets was being cut, and we had no other way to accomplish this training. The F-4 was the perfect platform to tow the banner and ensure we kept their aerial gunnery proficiency."

The F-4 models in use by the 82nd ATRS range in age from 36 to 42 years old and are flown and maintained right here on Tyndall. New procedures for attaching the banner to the jet had to be developed to ensure safety and effectiveness.

"We did our research and came up with new procedures for attaching the banner," said 53rd Test Support Squadron Assistant Director of Operations and the F-4 banner tow project manager, Maj. William Hope. "We adapted them from an old Navy banner tow system of another F-4 model and made some minor changes to the equipment to make it safer as well."

"Using the F-4 provides us with the capability to take advantage of training opportunities that otherwise would not have been available to us," he said.

The 60 foot-long banner is attached to the F-4 by specially trained maintainers.

"We attach the banner with a 120-foot chain to 1,680 feet of cable so there is 1,800 feet of clearance between the jet and the banner," said Tech. Sgt. Phillip Praeger, 82nd ATRS maintenance and logistics. "This leaves plenty of room between the banner and the F-4 in case the target is missed."

Lt. Col. Gregory Blount, 82nd ATRS director of operations, began flying the F-4's new mission two months ago.

"We have a special training program for pilots on Tyndall and we start with the most experienced because it is a new program," he said. "This is just another way the venerable Phantom continues to serve the Air Force nearly 50 years after it began service."

The plane's new role ensures the Defense Department has full-scale air-to-air target training, ensuring continued air dominance through highly specialized operational testing and evaluation of weapons systems.

"The 82nd ATRS operates the only F-4 banner tow in the Defense Department," said Colonel Blount. "We work in conjunction with the 83rd Fighter Weapons Squadron and we fall under the 53rd Weapons Evaluations Group, also located on Tyndall."

The 53rd WEG reports to the 53rd Weapons Evaluation Wing located at Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

According to safety officials, all sorties are conducted over water, far from shore. Officials work to ensure there are no stray boaters in the impact area. Mission complete, the F-4 returns to base and the banner is detached and evaluated for the number of bulls-eye hits it came back with. Pilots have an opportunity to evaluate how well they did, enhancing their training.

In addition to providing training, the F-4 banner tow mission is also a cost-saving initiative, saving the Air Force nearly \$750,000 a year.

"This is an enormous benefit to our combat fighter aircrews as well as to our cost-saving initiatives, because we are able to accomplish critical aerial gunnery training while flying," Colonel Luchsinger said.

The McDonnell Douglas-built aircraft is a two-seat, twin-engine, all-weather, long-range supersonic jet interceptor and fighter. It was originally developed for the U.S. Navy fleet defense in 1958, however it was later adopted by the U.S. Marines and the U.S. Air Force. It has been in Air Force service since 1961 and was extensively used by both the Navy and the Air Force during the Vietnam War. Today, modified F-4s are in use as QF-4 reusable full-scale target drones.

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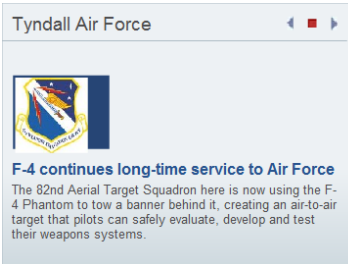
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