

4450th TACTICAL GROUP



LINEAGE

Activated 15 Oct 1979?

Inactivated, 5 Oct 1989

STATIONS

Tonopah Test Range, NV

Nellis AFB, NV, 15 Oct 1979

ASSIGNMENTS

Headquarters Tactical Air Command (TAC), 15 Oct 1979

USAF Tactical Fighter Weapons Center (TFWC), 1 Apr 1985

ATTACHMENTS

WEAPON SYSTEMS

COMMANDERS

Col Robert A. Jackson, 15 Oct 1979

Col James S. Allen, 17 May 1982

Col Howell M. Estes III, 15 Jun 1984

Col Michael W. Harris, 6 Dec 1985

Col Michael C. Short, 3 Apr 1987

Col Anthony J. Tolin, 10 Aug 1988-5 Oct 1989

HONORS

Service Streamers

Campaign Streamers

Armed Forces Expeditionary Streamers

Decorations

Air Force Outstanding Unit Awards

1 Jan 1987-31 Dec 1988

1 Jan 1984-31 Dec 1985

29 Oct 1981-28 Oct 1983

EMBLEM

EMBLEM SIGNIFICANCE

The 4450th's emblem is an eagle in the attack position on a black background, symbolizing night operations. The bird and the lightning bolts are white, with the bird's eye and lightning bolts embroidered in red to add color.

MOTTO

NICKNAME

OPERATIONS

The F-117A program began on 15 Oct 1979 with the birth of the 4450th Tactical Group at the Tonopah Test Range in Nye County, Nevada. Before inactivating on 5 Oct 1989, the group achieved many noteworthy accomplishments. For instance, the 4450th reached an initial operational capability (IOC) with the 4450th Test Squadron on 28 October 1983 and a second IOC with the 4453rd Test and Evaluation Squadron on 28 Jan 1987. The unit also passed two Tactical Air Command operational readiness inspections and unit effectiveness inspections with high marks. Besides increasing the number of F-117 sorties flown since the first flight in October 1982, the 4450th's pilots also flew A-7 Corsairs and T-38 Talons to accomplish the mission. On 10 Nov 1988, the Air Force officially announced the F-117A's existence. This act placed the 4450th on the road to inactivation and led to the 37th Tactical Fighter Wing's move from George AFB to Tonopah to carry out the F-117's sensitive worldwide mission.

A-UNIT

4450th Tactical Group (A-Unit)

('TR'), Tonopah Test Range, Nevada

The 4450th TG was activated on 15 October 1979 with Colonel Robert A. Jackson as commander. The four-digit number beginning with '4' signifies a 'provisional' group not entitled to permanent military lineage or heraldry. The best-kept secret of the time was the development of a strike aircraft intended to be largely invisible to radar, and the 4450th - also known as the A-Unit, one of a series of designations devised for everyday use because they conveyed no meaning - began life at Nellis AFB, Nevada, awaiting the mystery aircraft. The group began rotating pilots and maintenance personnel through the super-secret Groom Lake, Nevada, facility in 1981, although the group's home was always meant to be the Tonopah Test Range OTR) airfield, also in Nevada.

Although Colonel Jackson never flew the Senior Trend, he had a key role in hand-picking the field-grade officers who made up the initial cadre of stealth aircraft pilots. The group's Detachment 1, alias the Q-Unit commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Alton C. Whitley, set up shop at Tonopah, initially in mobile homes once operated by a Chevron oil drilling site, and was followed by the group headquarters. The group's Detachment 2, or R-Unit, activated with

the group on 15 October 1979 and was a small flight-test detachment which apparently kept a handful of test pilots at Burbank (later Palmdale) and Groom Lake.

Lieutenant Colonel Whitley's Detachment 1, with the first operational pilots who flew the Senior Trend aircraft, evolved into 4452nd Test Squadron 'Goat Suckers', still called the Q-Unit, by September 1982.

The first squadrons in the group, however, were the 4450th and 4451st Test Squadrons, activated on 11 June 1981. The 4450th Test Squadron 'Nightstalkers', or I-Unit, was first commanded by Major William C. Helper, and the 4451st Test Squadron 'Ghostriders', alias the P-Unit, by Lieutenant Colonel Jerry Fleming. The P-Unit operated the Vought A-7D aircraft stationed at Nellis AFB, Nevada, which served at first to give pilots flying time and to cover their true purpose; once Senior Trend aeroplanes began to enter service, the A-7Ds were used as chase, or 'companion', aircraft.

Colonel James S. Allen took command of the 4450th Tactical Group on 17 May 1982 and accepted the first operational Senior Trend (80-0787) at Tonopah on 23 August 1982, after the aircraft had passed initial trials at Groom Lake. The group attained IOC (initial operating capability) on 28 October 1983 with delivery of its 14th aircraft.

Colonel Howell M. Estes III became commander of the 4450th TG on 15 June 1984 and led the group through its first ORI (operational readiness inspection). The group's third squadron, filling out its intended strength from the beginning, was the 4453rd Test and Evaluation Squadron 'Grim Reaper', or the Z-Unit, activated on 1 October 1985 under Lieutenant Colonel Roger Locher.

Colonel Michael W. Harris assumed command of the group on 6 December 1985. Colonel Michael Short became commander on 3 April 1987. Colonel Anthony J. (Tony) Tolin took command on 10 August 1988.

When the F-117 was made public, the USAF no longer needed a provisional group to operate the aircraft. Furthermore, the identity of a line fighter wing, the 37th TFW (which was then winding down F-4G Advanced 'Wild Weasel' operations at George AFB, California) was available for immediate transfer. On 5 October 1989, the USAF inactivated the 4450th TG and put the group's commander (Colonel Tolin), people and equipment under the 37th TFW banner. In practical terms, this was a change of name only, as everything stayed in place and Tonopah remained the home of the 37th Tactical Fighter Wing.

TAC reassigned the 4450th Tactical Group from the major command to the Tactical Fighter Weapons Center. 1 Apr 1985

The 4450th Tactical Group inactivated. It had tested and trained in the F-117A, at Tonopah Air Field, Nevada. 5 Oct 1989

8 August 1984

A USAF LTV A-7D Corsair II, 69-6198, of the 4450th Tactical Group, lost power, caught fire and crashed into Midwest City, a suburb of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, pilot Maj. Dennis D. Nielson staying with aircraft as he attempted to steer it towards less-populous area before ejecting, but fighter impacted house, killing one, injuring one, one missing. Second victim found on 9 August. This unit was secretly operating Lockheed F-117 Nighthawks at this time.

14 October 1987/1988

An Lockheed F-117A Nighthawk, 83-815, of the 4450th Tactical Group, piloted by Maj. Michael C. Stewart, callsign *BURNR* ("burner") 54, crashes at 2033 hrs., 100 miles N of Nellis AFB, just E of Tonopah. Stewart was just 40 minutes into a routine single-ship sortie when his plane crashed into the gently sloping terrain 60 miles E of Alamo, Nevada, pilot KWF.

20 October 1987/1988

USAF LTV A-7D-4-CV Corsair II, 69-6207, of the 4450th Tactical Group, Nellis AFB, Nevada, loses all power 15 miles S of Indianapolis, Indiana at 31,000 feet while en route from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to Tinker AFB, Oklahoma. Pilot tries to dead-stick into Indianapolis International Airport but receives poor direction from air traffic controllers and crashes at 0915 hrs. during late turn after aiming plane at a baseball field but fighter veers, striking bank branch roof and hitting center of Ramada Inn across the street, killing nine employees, injuring five others (one of whom died later as a result of the injuries sustained). Pilot Maj. Bruce L. Teagarden, 35, ejected, suffering bruises and muscle strain. He lands in parking lot of Ace Supply Company, four blocks from the hotel. Air Force pays out \$50,427 in property claims damages, according to *The New York Times* on 26 October. This A-7D was part of the unit then secretly operating Lockheed F-117A Nighthawk stealth aircraft but this was successfully kept out of the media for several years.

Air Force Order of Battle

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Sources

AFHRA

Unit History. History and Lineage of the F-117A Stealth Fighter; Organizations. Office of History HQ 37 TFW.
Special Study HO-91-2. Dec 1991.