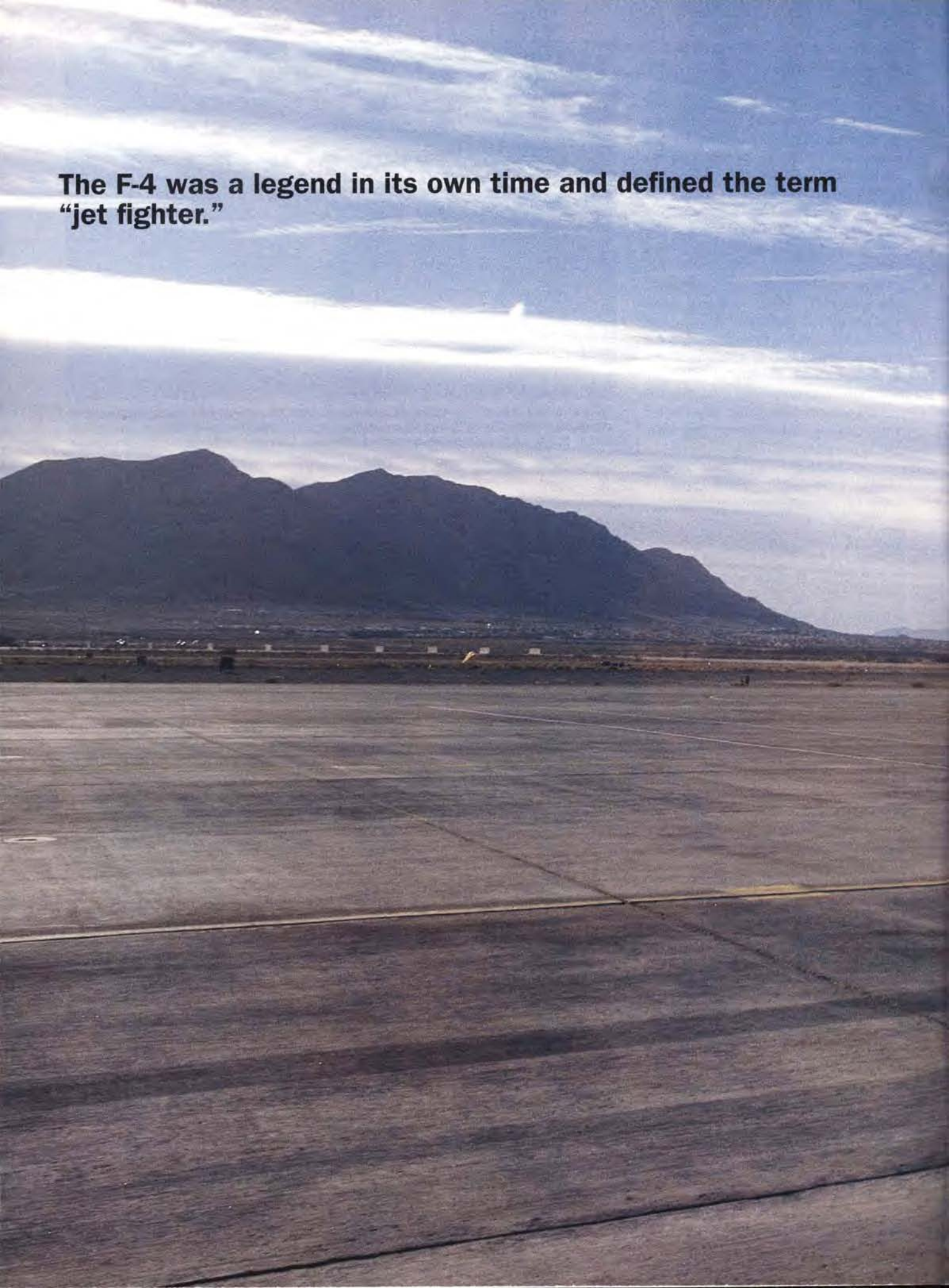


**The F-4 was a legend in its own time and defined the term  
“jet fighter.”**





# The Last Phantom

Photographs by Paul Kennedy and Guy Aceto, Art Director







On January 10, 1996, F-4Gs from the 561st Fighter Squadron took off from King Abdul-Aziz AB, Saudi Arabia, on the last USAF combat-coded mission for an aircraft type that had seen service for more than thirty years. At Nellis AFB, Nev. (above), two months later, "Wild Weasel" aircraft retired from the active-duty ranks for good, capping an era during much of which the F-4 Phantom II epitomized a US Air Force fighter aircraft.

Designed by McDonnell Aircraft Co. for the Navy as a carrier-based fleet air-defense fighter, the F4H-1 rolled out of the company facility at Lambert Field, Mo. McDonnell's chief test pilot, Robert C. Little, made the first flight on May 27, 1958. The Navy flew the first production F4H-1 on March 25, 1961. Tactical Air Command headquarters at Langley AFB, Va., took delivery of two Phantoms, designated F-110A, in January 1962. After testing, the first production version—redesignated F-4C—went to MacDill AFB, Fla.



Photo by Paul Kennedy

USAF Phantoms first saw combat during the Vietnam War. The F-4G "Advanced Wild Weasel," a conversion from the F-4E, grew out of the need for defense against North Vietnamese surface-to-air missile (SAM) and anti-aircraft artillery sites. Before its conversion, this F-4G (above) had been piloted by Capt. Fred W. Sheffler and weapon system officer Capt. Mark A. Massen, both of the 336th Tactical Fighter Squadron, who

shot down a North Vietnamese MiG-21 in August 1972. Twenty-four years later, the aircraft—shown here at Nellis AFB—still wears a red star, a reminder of that engagement.





*During its prime, the Phantom II was USAF's dominant fighter. At Nellis, Lt. Col. (Col. selectee) Jim Uken, last commander of the 561st Fighter Squadron, recalled, "It was not unusual fifteen years ago to come to Nellis for a Red Flag and have almost one hundred percent of the players [flying] F-4s." He noted, "It's been modified to do virtually every mission that the Air Force or the Navy has offered." Above, some of the last F-4Gs, from the 561st FS, await their final sorties from the Nellis flight line. The unit had flown the Phantom since converting from F-105G "Weasels" in 1978, while at George AFB, Calif.*



Staff photo by Guy Aceto





Moving confidently around a Phantom, assistant aircraft crew chief A1C Gabrielle Montoya of the 561st FS exemplifies the knowledge, skill, and professionalism that kept the Phantoms flying. After a stellar performance in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the 561st and its F-4s were reactivated at Nellis, and maintenance personnel volunteered for a last chance to work on the legendary fighter. Despite the aircraft's age, dedicated "Weasel Keepers" kept it going through numerous TDYs to southwest Asia, maintaining mission capable rates rivaling those of newer aircraft. A couple of F-4s will fly on in foreign air forces and as drones in testing units, but most will reside in the boneyard at Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz.



Since the mid-1980s, "Wild Weasels" had been paired with F-4Es or F-16s in highly effective hunter-killer teams. There is no direct replacement for the two-seater and its superb ability to handle the Suppression of Enemy Air Defenses role. For now, the single-seat F-16 Fighting Falcon, equipped with the High-Speed Antiradiation Missile Targeting System, will counter SAM threats. The development of the AGM-88

(above) is one of the Phantom's legacies. In the past, nearly every weapon that could be shot, dropped, or fired from an aircraft was standard equipment on a Phantom.



Photo by Randy Jolly

The first F4H-1 prototype in 1958—with its nose plunging down and its tail surfaces jutting up—prompted the wisecrack that the aircraft looked like someone had stepped on its nose and kicked it in the tail. By 1996, one of the last Phantoms in flight over the Nevada desert was thought by many to be a study in beautiful lines and form.

During the Vietnam War, the Phantom's speed, acceleration, radar, and weapon systems made it a favorite among USAF's Vietnam War aces—Capt. Richard S. "Steve" Ritchie piloted an F-4, while Capt. Charles B. DeBellevue and Jeffrey S. Feinstein were F-4 WSOs. Col. Robin Olds, the first and only USAF ace with World War II and Vietnam War victories, also flew an F-4 and commanded the Phantom pilots of the 8th Tactical Fighter Wing at Ubon RTAB, Thailand.



Staff photos by Guy Aceto







Pilot Capt. "Stamp" Walden and WSO Capt. John "Hap" Arnold, both of the 561st FS, prepare for one of their last sorties from Nellis. While some members of the unit had less than a year of F-4 experience, Colonel Uken had two decades with the Phantom, and his father was an F-4 navigator, among the first to make the transition to the RF-4s.



Even as F-4s were phasing out of the force, they were acquitting themselves well, firing some of the earliest shots in the Gulf War, taking down Iraqi air defense sites. The HARMs carried on the Weasels and other systems were so effective that the Iraqis were afraid to turn on their radar equipment. In a somewhat ignominious end for such a legend, the Weasel above is

headed for the target range at Nellis. Colonel Uken said some F-4s will be serving in the QF-4 drone program for another ten years.





Staff photos by Guy Aceto



*The Weasel motto—"First In—Last Out"—seems a fitting tribute to the Phantom. In September 1995, the 124th Wing, Idaho Air National Guard, flew the 50,000th sortie of Operation Provide Comfort, over northern Iraq. It was one of its last operational missions. Once back home on station, the F-4s finally had a mass end-of-tour ceremony, last rides, and a washdown for their crews in April. Like the P-51 Mustang and the F-86 Sabre, the multirole Phantom defined an era. "The Phantom, in my opinion, will go down as one of the great aircraft in aviation history," said Colonel Uken. He spoke for many when he said, "Most of the guys feel privileged to have flown the Phantom. It's been a tremendous aircraft." ■*

