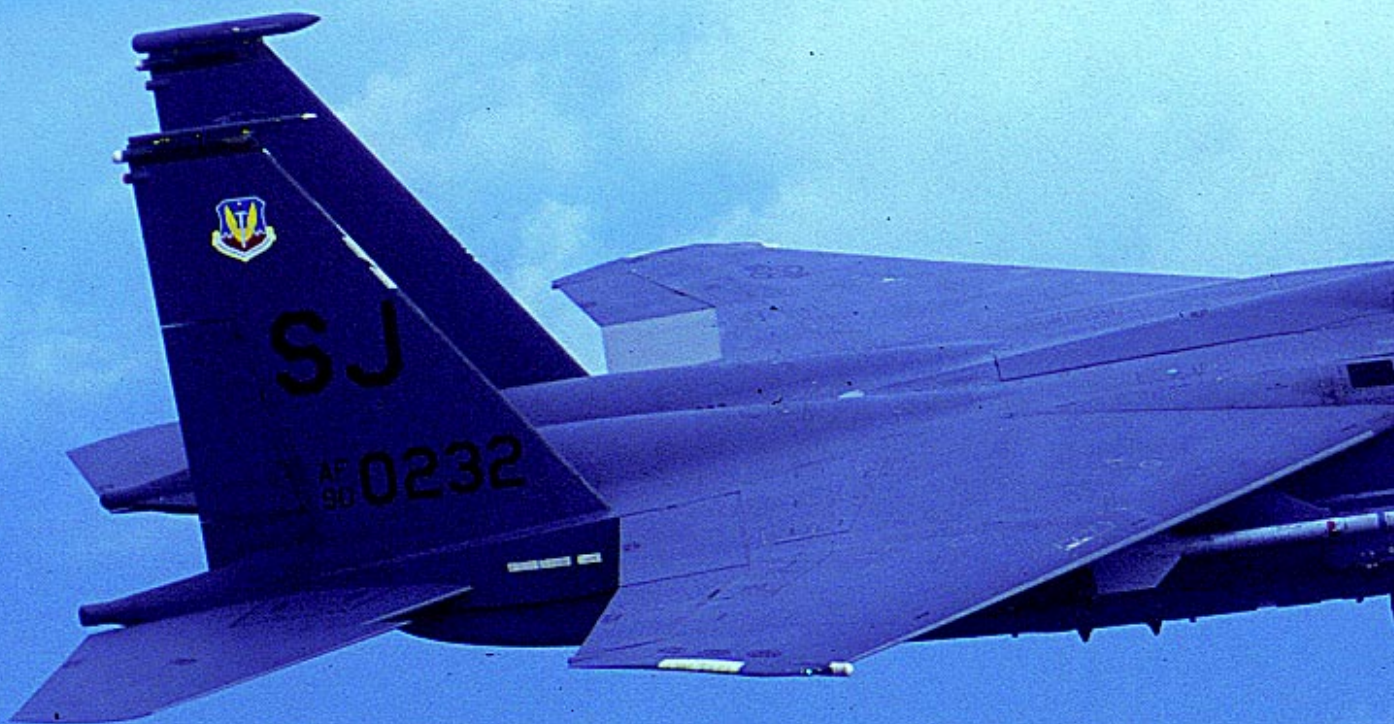


The power and precision of USAF's F-15E Strike Eagles starts with the Fourth Fighter Wing.

When



The Outer Banks of North Carolina blur beneath an F-15E of the 335th Fighter Squadron as it heads out over the Atlantic on a training sortie.

Eagles Strike



Photography by Guy Aceto, Art Director and Paul Kennedy

The 4th Fighter Wing originated with three "Eagle Squadrons"—American volunteers who flew in Britain's Royal Air Force before US entry into World War II. They were among the first to face the German Luftwaffe and numbered some of the first American aces in that war. They also destroyed more enemy aircraft than any other American unit. Since they led the way, the wing's motto, "Fourth but First," seemed a natural.

Based at Seymour Johnson AFB, N.C., the unit was also first to fly the F-15E Strike Eagle operationally and the first to take it to war in Desert Storm in 1991.



The 4th FW today has nearly 90 fighters in four squadrons: the 333rd, 334th, 335th, and 336th. It is one of the largest fighter wings in the Air Force. Above, a returning Strike Eagle taxis past a long row of F-15Es.

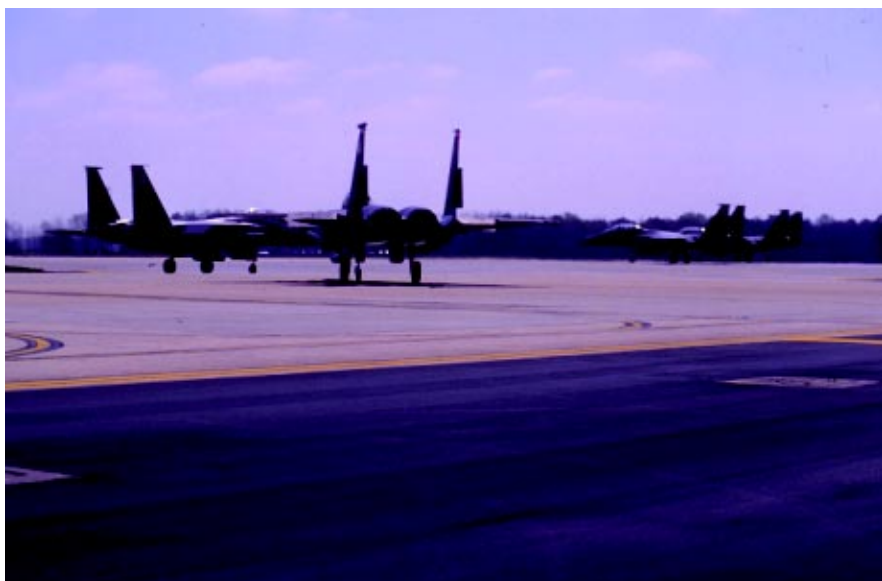
Left and below, last-minute checks are performed before takeoff on an afternoon mission.

Photo by Paul Kennedy



In addition to supporting operational missions, Seymour Johnson hosts the F-15E "schoolhouse," where Strike Eagle crews learn their trade. The 4th Training Squadron handles the academics, while the 333rd and 334th provide the flying training. Every F-15E crew starts here before being assigned to one of six Strike Eagle squadrons in USAF.

At right, a pair of F-15Es prepare to light the burners for takeoff while two more move into position on a busy day of flying.





An F-15E pulls a hard right turn, showing off its capacity to carry a wide array of stores. Just behind the air intakes are the two LANTIRN (Low Altitude Navigation and Targeting Infrared for Night) pods.

Frequent deployments and constant training keep the Strike Eagle crews sharp. Their mission—long-range, precision attack—is in high demand.



The targeting and navigation system, together with a data link that brings up-to-the-minute target data right into the cockpit, ensure the Strike Eagle can hit the objective precisely, in any weather.



Although optimized for ground attack, the F-15E retains all the dogfighting power of the F-15C from which it was derived.

The F-15E is a formidable combination of heavy weapons load and precision, provided by LANTIRN and a terrain-mapping radar. Wing technicians test LANTIRN pods on exactly the same equipment they use when deployed.

At right, SSgt Doug Miller (left) and SrA. Kari Allen work with a wide array of test gear to check and recheck the systems that bring steel precisely down on target. LANTIRN has been improved since its introduction, and, now, next generation pods like the Litening system provide even more precise target information.



Photos by Paul Kennedy



Today's fighters don't just drop munitions, they also feed them crucial data en route to the target. At left, maintenance crews monitor software that allows the Strike Eagle to "talk" to its weapons.

The addition of the Joint Direct Attack Munition to the Strike Eagle's repertoire has expanded its capability and versatility. Data links allowing ground units to pass targeting information right to the cockpit have greatly enhanced the ability of the Strike Eagle to perform close air support.

If things go wrong, the pilot needs to be able to count on the aircraft's escape systems. These technicians, here updating an ACES II ejection seat, work to make sure that these last-chance systems work as advertised. With a shooting war on, motivation is high.



Staff photos by Guy Aceto



Periodic teardown inspections give maintainers good insight into the health of their aircraft. These technicians go the extra mile to make sure everything is perfect. Nearly 90 airplanes operate from the base, so this shop is tightly scheduled and work continues 24 hours a day.

The F-15's basic design is more than 35 years old, but F-15Es are newer. More are still being produced for the export market.

At left, A1C Shawn Krath is up to his neck in afterburner maintenance, helped by SrA Chris Reams.



The 4th Fighter Wing stores its external fuel tanks in a novel system that looks like racks at a dry cleaner. One of these systems can hold 100 fuel tanks, any one of which can be called up after draining and checks. In combat, the unit uses disposable tanks, assembled in-theater, that can be jettisoned if a Strike Eagle needs to make a quick getaway.



Staff photo by Guy Aceto



Above, A1C Catherine Powers adjusts the fuze on a bomb while SSgt. David E. Vancamp instructs. Powers and the rest of the load crew undergo quarterly training on every weapon the F-15E can carry. The 5,000-pound, laser guided GBU-28 "bunker buster" is carried exclusively by the F-15E.

At right, A1C Edmund Nourrie positions a 2,000-pound bomb on the F-15E. He drives a special bomb loading vehicle nicknamed the "Jammer." In the foreground is a 500-pound bomb. Once loaded, the bombs receive their laser seekers, turning them into laser guided bombs (LGBs). The 500-pound LGBs were a preferred weapon in Iraq because of their precision and limited blast radius. Both of these weapons are inert training rounds, a fact indicated by the blue bands around their necks.





The 4th FW flew missions over Afghanistan from Al Jaber AB, Kuwait, setting records for some of the longest fighter missions in history. By the end of Operation Enduring Freedom, crews of the 335th Fighter Squadron had garnered four Silver Stars and seven Distinguished Flying Crosses.

The 335th was replaced at Al Jaber by the 336th, which went to war in Iraq. The 335th was later summoned to join its sister squadron in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Despite losing an aircraft and being shorthanded, the 4th Fighter Wing never lowered the pace of its operations.

In one 11-day sortie surge during OIF, F-15Es from the 4th Fighter Wing carried 3.4 million pounds of munitions.



Photo by Paul Kennedy



At top, an F-15E crew trains hard in the military operating area off the Carolina coast. Above, a 335th pilot performs his walkaround and gives the thumbs up at left. The F-15E is a powerful machine that provides unsurpassed capability to the Air Force, but the 4th Fighter Wing has it under control.