

The Weapons



School Way

The USAF Weapons School provides the skills that keep the Air Force the world's best.

Photography by Rick Llinares
Text by Seth J. Miller



A USAF Weapons School F-16 blasts into action from Nellis AFB, Nev., on June 6, 2012.

The USAF Weapons School is a key factor in keeping the Air Force's qualitative edge. Every six months, a new class of top airmen receives training in the finer points of their weapons system and how it integrates with the Air Force as a whole. Before graduation, the class of roughly 90 students must pass the Mission Employment (ME) phase—a capstone exercise to demonstrate tactical expertise. ME includes flying exercises and takes place at the Nevada Test and Training Range. **111** A Weapons School F-22 soars above the training range during a June 13 Mission Employment flying window called a “vul”—short for vulnerability period. **121** L-r: Lt. Col. Matt Bowers and student Capt. Robert Switzer at the controls of their KC-135 during the final vul for the class that graduated in June.



1



4

131 A 66th Weapons Squadron A-10 has sun shields placed on the cockpit canopy to protect the aircraft's instruments from extreme desert heat. Warthogs are housed on the far side of the base's main runway in revetments. **141** During ME, an F-22 is photographed from the vantage point of a KC-135 boom operator.



2



3



The Weapons School selects only the best as students. At the school, students hone their skills for nearly half a year. By the time they graduate, they are expected to be approachable experts in the art and science of combat. Newly minted graduates take these skills to follow-on assignments throughout the Air Force. This year, with the introduction of a cyber weapons instructor course,

23 different combat specialties were represented at the first 2012 course. 11| An F-16 from the 64th Aggressor Squadron departs Nellis. 12| On the ground, A1C Joshua Rivera cleans an aggressor F-16's canopy. 13| The lead element breaks away from a formation of six F-15Es over Nellis. 14| A KC-135 lifts off in June. Ninety USAF and Navy aircraft from across the US took part in this ME. 15| A C-17 from

the 57th Weapons Squadron at JB McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, N.J., lands at Nellis. The Weapons School, a part of Nellis' 57th Wing, has squadrons both on base and at other locations across the US.

The vuls consist of day and night missions where bombers, transports, fighters, command and control aircraft, tankers, and other assets simulate combat operations. On the ground, numerous air, space, and cyberspace personnel support these missions, aimed at improving the students' combat, surveillance, and defensive tactics. Munitions, maintenance, fuels, and weapons loading personnel are all essential to the task. **1** L-r: A1C Mai Khanh and SSgt. Kyle Britton transport AIM-9 Sidewinders on the ramp. **2** A B-52 from the 340th Weapons Squadron at Barksdale AFB, La., undergoes maintenance in the dedicated bomber pad, located across from the main Weapons School static ramps. **3** Crew chief A1C Reuben Stoica straps Maj. Ronald Gilbert into an F-22.





1



2



3



4

The Nevada Test and Training Range provides the perfect space to simulate combat operations. Stretching over 2.9 million acres of land and 5,000 square miles of airspace, it allows the students to test weapons in a realistic environment. 111 A 64th Aggressor Squadron F-16 takes off on an ME sortie. 121 SrA. Jaquan Dixon, 2nd Lt. Noah Demerly, and A1C Jessica Swanger (l-r, on the ground) perform postflight maintenance on an F-15C. A1C Oliver Gutierrez works atop the aircraft. 131 An E-3 AWACS, framed against Sunrise Mountain, approaches the runway at the end of a training flight. 141 A B-1B Lancer, assigned to the 77th Weapons Squadron at Dyess AFB, Tex., rolls down the runway for an ME sortie.

During their culminating exercise, students plan and execute every aspect of air and space combat operations. It takes more than 30,000 man-hours and 1,400 flight hours to prepare students for ME. **1** An F-15C Eagle departs from Nellis in full burner. The WA tail code indicates it belongs to the Weapons Center's parent organization, the USAF Warfare Center. **2** SSgt. Michael Cooper removes foreign object damage covers from a 16th Weapons Squadron F-16. **3** An F-15C flairs on rollout after landing on the Nellis runway. **4** Swanger, Dixon, and Demerly (l-r, on the ground) and Gutierrez work on an F-15C after a sortie in June.





1|1 A1C Richard Dougherty inspects an F-15E after the day's flight activity. *1|2* An F-16 from the 64th Aggressor Squadron taxis to the southwest end of the runway pad for checks before an ME sortie. *1|3* An F-15E, as seen from a KC-135, as the Strike Eagle takes on fuel. *1|4* An EC-130H from Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., prepares to land at Nellis. The Compass Call, a heavily modified C-130 Hercules, disrupts enemy command and control communications. After their last ME mission, crew members receive a traditional dousing with water, then a bottle of champagne. On successfully completing the exercise and course, graduates earn the highly prestigious USAF Weapons School patch to wear on their flight suits. The graduates are then known as "Patch-Wearers." ■