

From Gunnery School to Weapons School

The Nevada school has expanded its offerings whenever USAF needed a new breed of weapons expert.

Photography by Rick Llinares and
the US Air Force Weapons School





In April 1995, F-4G "Wild Weasels" of the 561st Fighter Squadron fly over the Nellis Range Complex, Nev., with a pair of F-16s from the 57th Wing in the background.

The US Air Force Weapons School traces its history to 1949, when the Aircraft Gunnery School stood up at Las Vegas AFB, Nev. It brought together a group of World War II combat veterans to teach the next generation of pilots about the rigors of aerial combat. In 1950, the site became Nellis Air Force Base, and four years later the school was renamed the USAF Fighter Weapons School. It began to train fighter instructors. In the decades that followed, students trained in all manner of aircraft to meet the needs of an evolving Air Force. In 1992, to reflect the inclusion of other aircraft, the school became the US Air Force Weapons School. Here's a look back at some of its aircraft, through the years.



11 A Fighter Weapons School F-105F, circa the early 1960s, at Nellis. *12* A quartet of F-80 Shooting Stars in the mid-1950s. *13* An F-100 Super Sabre in action near Nellis. *14* An F-86 Sabre, circa 1954.



111 A Fighter Weapons School F-84 Thunderjet takes off some time in the mid-'50s. Throughout the 1950s, students trained in the F-51, F-80, F-84, and all versions of the F-100. By 1960 the F-100 and F-105 had become the two primary fighters at the school. 121 A Fighter Weapons School "Heritage Flight" takes to the air in the 1950s, with an F-51 at top, an F-86 below it, and an F-100D at the bottom. 131 "Air Corps Gunnery School" reads the sign in front of the flagpole. Las Vegas Air Force Base got its start as an Army Air Corps school for aerial gunners. 141 An F-51 Mustang, known as the P-51 during its famed World War II service, sports "The Fighter School" on its nose.



111 An F-4 Phantom II displays the 57th Fighter Weapons Wing emblem just behind the weapon systems officer's seat, in this photo, circa 1970. The early 1970s saw an increase in attention to air-to-air combat skills after analysis of Vietnam War aerial engagements revealed the Air Force needed to re-emphasize realistic threats in dissimilar air combat. 121 A two-ship of Fighter Weapons School A-7D Corsair II attack jets in flight. A-7s had a brief tenure at the school in the early 1970s but by 1975 were phased out in favor of using F-5s as aggressors. 131 An EC-130 Compass Call flies over the Nellis Range Complex in April 1995. Following the standup of Air Combat Command in 1992, the school overhauled its curriculum, adding bomber, helicopter, RC-135, and EC-130 courses. Today only 30 percent of the students come from the classic fighter specialties. 141 The weapons school belongs to what is now the 57th Wing. Here, a quartet of 57th Wing A-10s in 1995 carry inert AGM-65 Maverick and AIM-9 Sidewinder missiles and an ALQ-131 electronic countermeasures pod.





111 An A-10 Warthog of the 57th Wing pops flares in 1995. 121 A USAF B-1B (foreground) from the 28th Bomb Wing at Ellsworth AFB, S.D.—detached to the 57th Wing—and one of the weapons school's F-15 Eagles overfly the range in December 1994. 131 A USAF F-15 Eagle assigned to the weapons school flies over Nevada in 1995. 141 Also in 1995, an F-4G with the 561st Fighter Squadron flies over the Sally Corridor area of the Nellis Range Complex. The last Phantom II class graduated from the weapons school in 1985, ending 20 years of F-4 weapons officer training, but the fighter remained in USAF service in the Wild Weasel suppression of enemy air defenses role until 1996.



11 A US Air Force Weapons School F-16 bearing a 50th anniversary paint scheme sits on the ramp at Nellis in 1999. The F-16 division of the school graduated its first students in 1982. *12* Three F-15E Strike Eagles from the weapons school fly over the Caliente section of the Nellis Range Complex in 2000. A ground-attack variant of the F-15 Eagle, the F-15E has merited its own division at the school since 1991. *13* An F-111 detached to the weapons school from Cannon AFB, N.M., flies over Nevada during a 1994 mission. *14* An F-4G of the 57th Wing in action at Nellis in 1995.





111 An F-111 from Cannon with a pair of F-16s in 1995. 121 A KC-135 from the 151st Air Refueling Group of the Utah Guard refuels US Air Force Weapons School F-15 Eagles. A 2006 merger with the Mobility Weapons School added instructor courses for the KC-135, C-130, and C-17 to the curriculum. 131 An E-3 AWACS from Tinker AFB, Okla., before a weapons school Mission Employment phase sortie in 1994. The Air Force needed more weapons officers skilled at integrating all aspects of its domains, so the school has continued to expand. 141 A B-52 detached from Barksdale AFB, La., in 1999. Today's US Air Force Weapons School covers 22 combat specialties. It consists of 18 squadrons at eight locations, drawing together a wide range of air, space, and cyber curriculums. ■