The F-15—a twin-engine, all-weather tactical aircraft—was, without doubt, the world’s top air superiority fighter between 1974 (when it entered service) and 2005 (when the F-22 achieved IOC). The McDonnell Douglas fighter scored 104 aerial victories with zero losses. A later E-variant, optimized for ground attack, dominated in that mission. It was exported to Israel, Japan, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, and Singapore.

McDonnell Douglas gave the Eagle an all-metal fuselage with large, shoulder-mounted wings, thin tailplanes, and two potent turbofan engines. The F-15’s dominance stemmed from an unprecedented mix of acceleration, maneuverability, versatile weapons load, and advanced avionics. A high thrust-to-weight ratio let the F-15 turn tightly without losing airspeed. Its “look-down/shoot-down” radar distinguished moving targets from ground clutter. The airplane was constantly upgraded.

First kills were recorded by Israeli F-15s against Syria in 1979-82. The first major combat by USAF F-15s came in the 1991 Gulf War, when the Eagle scored 34 kills against Iraqi warplanes and struck key ground targets. F-15s have flown in every major US operation since, from the Balkans to Iraq, from Afghanistan to Libya. New models are being produced for export; plans call for keeping the production line open until 2019—47 years after first flight.

—Robert S. Dudney with Walter J. Boyne

Interesting Facts
Has never been shot down in air-to-air combat • was first US fighter with thrust sufficient to accelerate vertically • destroyed satellite with ASM-135 missile • set eight time-to-climb records in 1975 • reached 98,425 ft altitude in 3 min, 28 sec • downed 41 Syrian fighters (zero losses) in 1982 Lebanon War • destroyed 18 Iraqi jets on ground at Tallil in Gulf War • downed Iraqi Mi-24 helo in flight with a 2,000-lb bomb • flew longest-ever fighter mission (15.5 hours, Afghanistan) • escorted Israeli strike against Iraq’s Osirak nuclear plant in 1981.

Famous Fliers