

Fighter crews from the German Luftwaffe stretch their wings in the skies over the New Mexico desert.

High Plains Luftwaffe

Photography by Ted Carlson





Two German air force Tornados and two F-4Fs fly over the southwest US. They are part of the German air force's Tactical Training Center, established as a tenant at Holloman AFB, N.M., in 1996 in a unique 10-year lease arrangement with the German government.



German air force F-4Fs and Tornados, such as the one at left, have flown over the southwest US for the past three years. This year, the German Tactical Training Center, which officially opened at Holloman AFB, N.M., May 1, 1996, plans to expand its operations. As part of the original \$48 million Foreign Military Sales program, the German government signed a 10-year lease to operate the center at Holloman and invested \$42 million to build an aircraft maintenance hangar, six aircraft parking hangars, an engine testing "hush" house, and smaller buildings for supplies, storage, and administration. By the end of 1999, the Germans expect to spend an additional \$125 million for more infrastructure.

The expansion will increase the number of Tornados from the current 12 to 42. The number of German military personnel will grow from 300 to nearly 1,000. According to TTC officials, the Holloman area is ideal for its sunny weather and vast training spaces, plus it's close to the German air base ground defense school, just 90 miles south at Ft. Bliss, Texas. The locale—lacking Germany's often inclement weather and the altitude restrictions necessitated by its population density—enables the Luftwaffe to trim six months from its normal 24-month Tornado training regimen.



Although the TTC is the first military aircrew training facility leased by a foreign government in the US, NATO aircrews have been trained in this country for 30 years. That training is conducted using American facilities and aircraft and, for the most part, American instructors. While the TTC's F-4F training uses a combination of US and German instructors, the Tornado Training Squadron is 100 percent Luftwaffe. The Tornado Interdictor Strike fighter, which first entered service in the late 1970s, is flown by the UK and Italy as well as Germany. The all-weather Tornados feature two engines, short takeoff and landing ability, fly-by-wire controls, automatic terrain following, and an autonomous navigation system.



Above, two F-4s head out to a nearby range. The 24 F-4Fs now at Holloman are owned by the German air force but fall under the operational control of Air Combat Command's 49th Fighter Wing, through the wing's 20th Fighter Squadron. About 20 USAF Instructor Pilots and nine instructor Weapon Systems Officers from the 20th, along with three German IPs and one WSO, train some 30 German crew members annually. (Germany, Greece, and Turkey still fly F-4s in air defense and attack roles.) The squadron, known as the Silver Lobos, provides both basic instruction for new F-4 crews and fighter weapons instruction for experienced crews. It is a Foreign Military Sales–dedicated squadron and moved to Holloman from George AFB, Calif., in mid-1992. Initially, the 20th trained the German crews in the F-4E, which it brought with it from George. The unit completed conversion to F models in 1998—enabling the German crews to train in the same model they will fly operationally.



At middle right, a pilot and WSO taxi the huge fighter back to the line. Below right, some of the newly arrived F-4s still carry a Luftwaffe tactical paint scheme.

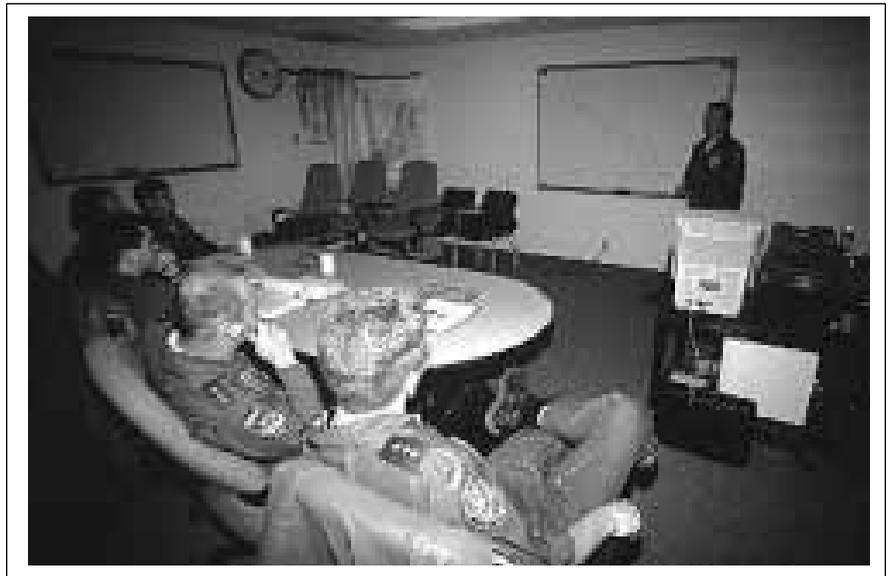




At left, an outbound Tornado crew makes a check of their refueling probe before a mission. During 1999, as the additional Tornados arrive at their desert home, so will additional military personnel and their families. Like many US service members and their families who served tours in Germany, the Germans are living largely on the local economy. Local officials consider the venture an economic boom. The "willkommen" sign is out.

The first TTC commander, Col. Eckhard Sowada, who learned to pilot the F-104 at Luke AFB, Ariz., in 1970, noted that more than five times the number of personnel needed to establish and run the center at Holloman volunteered to come to the US. The weather and the wide open spaces—New Mexico and Germany are roughly the same size, but New Mexico has only 1.7 million people compared to Germany's 84 million—make training easier. Additionally, the Germans, like their American counterparts in Europe, take the opportunity to travel.

However, establishing the training regimen was no snap. It required a new syllabus and learning the ranges and how to fly in the hotter, high altitude environment. It took three to four months of preparation before the TTC could hold its first Tornado fighter weapons instructor course.



At left, Lt. Col. Frank Feldhausen uses a couple of visual aids to get his point across to his students. Center commander Sowada noted that "the training is very sound, technical, and the students benefit greatly." The crews receive intense air-to-air and air-to-ground training in 3.5-week-long courses, while others attend the six-month fighter weapons school. He called the training at Holloman efficient, adding, "Tactically it is also important to be shoulder to shoulder and train here with our allies, especially since the US has pulled out of many places in Germany."



Above, a Tornado roars along on the way to a nearby range. A typical Tornado sortie at Holloman is a four-ship formation, with a low-level refueling before tackling either a live-ordnance or non-live range. The length of a sortie extends from just over an hour up to three hours. At right, the day's sortie done, a pilot and WSO go to debrief. The students go to a technical and maintenance debrief and write up any problems. It takes another hour or so to gather the weapons data. An entire debrief may last from one to four hours, depending on the complexity of the sortie.

Pentagon officials called the training initiative "an important step forward in a very mature and productive alliance." According to Sowada, the Germans' reception in the local area was "overwhelming." He commended the 49th FW staff and Alamogordo community. "We are also strengthening our bonds as allies and learning to fly and fight as a team." ■

