

ANG F-16s, equipped with an aerial reconnaissance system, provide a unique and important USAF capability.

RECONNAISSANCE



IN FORCE

Photography by Paul Kennedy, SSgt. Aaron D. Allmon II, and MSgt. Glenn Wilkewitz



A Michigan Air National Guard F-16C, equipped with the Theater Airborne Reconnaissance System pod, patrols the sky above Iraq.

Last February, the 107th Fighter Squadron, Selfridge ANGB, Mich., became the first F-16 unit to be based in Iraq and the first to employ the Theater Airborne Reconnaissance System (TARS) and Litening advanced targeting pods in combat. The only other USAF F-16 unit to carry "recce" pods is the 192nd Fighter Wing of the Virginia Air National Guard.

In 1995, the Air Force equipped the 192nd F-16s with a portable reconnaissance pod. By April 1996, the ANG unit was rated mission capable in its new armed recce role and had deployed to Aviano AB, Italy, to fly patrols over Bosnia.



Above, an F-16 from the 192nd FW, Richmond Airport, Va., flies over Iraq.

At left and below, Capt. Ronald Schaupeter, 107th FS, conducts preflight checks during deployment in Iraq.

Officials of the 107th said they had had an abundance of volunteers for the deployment to Iraq, making it unnecessary to mobilize anyone. While in Iraq, the 107th flew some 800 sorties, logging 3,000 flying hours—about a year's worth of normal flying in only three months.

USAF photos by MSgt. Glenn Wilkewitz



Above, another 107th FS F-16 prepares to land in Iraq. The unit flew out of Kirkuk Air Base.





The decision to put a reconnaissance pod on the F-16 came in the mid-1990s. When USAF retired its RF-4C, it planned to end the manned recce program altogether. Instead, it decided to try altering portable recce pods for use on the F-16, which then could serve as an armed reconnaissance platform.

USAF selected ANG's 192nd Fighter Wing to test the concept. Soon, the 192nd had fitted electro-optical pods on unit F-16s and deployed to Italy.

The concept worked well. After testing it with the 192nd, USAF began developing a new recce system and tasked the Michigan ANG's 107th Fighter Squadron to add reconnaissance to its mission.



At top and above, MSgt. Keith Joyce of the 192nd FW checks out a new TARS pod. At left, stored pods are kept ready for use.

At right, Lt. Col. Steve Swetnam, the 192nd's chief of intelligence, processes TARS imagery on the squadron ground station.

TARS pods were developed in 1998 and declared operational in 2000. TARS was built as an interim system, but 192nd FW officials say it may be around for some time. In fact, USAF is considering major improvements to the system.

TARS collects intelligence from the battlefield in daytime, below the weather.



For both squadrons, planning and attention to detail are key. At left, Maj. Bill Butz of the 192nd FW develops his flight plan. Below, unit members keep the work flowing at the 192nd duty desk.



Pilots keep sharp with simulator training. At right, 192nd pilots Maj. Dave Nardi (left, in the cockpit) and Maj. Rick Gingue go to work in a unit training device used primarily for part-task training. ANG recently upgraded the simulator with a targeting pod and other capabilities.





Above, maintenance personnel work on a fighter in a 192nd FW hangar in Virginia.

Maintenance personnel are critical to both units. The heavy flying schedule in Southwest Asia required more than normal maintenance. The desert conditions posed another challenge—keeping sand from causing damage to parts.

The 107th and 192nd maintainers have been rewriting field maintenance guidelines for the new recce and targeting systems.



Above, SSgt. Jennifer Ely gets into her work, performing an engine inlet inspection on the Virginia flight line. At far left, crew chief MSgt. Floyd Brown checks out an F-16 cockpit.



At right, a 107th FS F-16 is prepared to take off on a sortie over Iraq, loaded for its dual role of armed reconnaissance.

In addition to TARS, the two units employ the new Litening advanced targeting and navigation system that provides precision strike capability.

With the combination of the TARS and Litening systems, the F-16 can fly close air support while it is gathering battle damage assessment data or current battlefield intelligence. Images are processed within 30 minutes of landing. However Lt. Col. Glenn Schmidt, 107th FS commander, said TARS in 2005 would gain data-link capability for real-time assessment.



USAF photo by MSgt. Glenn Wilkewitz

Photos by Paul Kennedy



At left, Lt. Col. Keith Wark of the 192nd FW checks over his F-16 before a training sortie. His right hand rests on a Litening II pod.

Below, Wark writes some notes as crew chief SSgt. Bryan Reynolds makes an adjustment to the aircraft.



Above, Wark performs the walkaround, his last check of the aircraft before takeoff.





Above, a 192nd Fighter Wing F-16 takes off from its home base in Virginia on a training flight.

At right and below, pilots from Michigan's 107th Fighter Squadron conduct preflight checks before launching on combat sorties in Iraq.

Below, right, a 107th F-16 flies over Iraq.



Both ANG units anticipate a hectic pace of operations for some time to come. ■