

# Living in the

**Manned and unmanned QF-4s make for spectacular targets.**

Photography by Greg L. Davis



# Bull's-Eye



*A QF-4E aerial target over the Gulf of Mexico, near Tyndall AFB, Fla. Old Phantoms, dating back to the 1960s and 1970s, continue to serve in a weapons test capacity, although their days, even as targets, are numbered.*

**T**he 82nd Aerial Targets Squadron provides a vital service in the testing of munitions—something to shoot at. F-4 Phantoms, many of which saw service in Vietnam and the 1991 Gulf War, fly missions both from Tyndall AFB, Fla., and the 82nd ATRS' Det. 1 at Holloman AFB, N.M. Reconfigured as targets (the "Q" designator) by BAE Systems, most still carry a pilot to take the controls if something goes awry. Those QF-4s that might be hit by a weapon fly unmanned. [1] A QF-4E on a training sortie near Tyndall. The orange fin and wingtips—sometimes Day-Glo green or yellow—denote a target.



[2] This F-4E went to the Davis-Monthan AFB, Ariz., Boneyard in 1991, but was resurrected as a target. It will fly as such until it reaches its limit of flying hours and is marked for "death row"—condemned to live-fire tests. [3] Safety pilot Tom Mudge, a contractor, clears for traffic. [4] Another QF-4E taxis out.





**[1]** A row of QF-4s at Tyndall. Most were F-4Es and F-4G Wild Weasels; the next batch converted to drones will be former RF-4C tactical reconnaissance airplanes. **[2]** A few QF-4s are nicely maintained in a high-gloss Southeast Asia (SEA) camouflage used during the Vietnam War, and are flown in “heritage” displays at air shows. The tail flash denotes its current assignment.

**[3]** The 82nd ATRS badge. **[4]** The QF-4 at left in this image is still wearing its European One green camouflage from the Cold War era. **[5]** In this stock footage sequence, a QF-4 meets its messy but honorable end at the hands of a test air-to-air missile. Death row aircraft are scavenged for parts before their final missions. This helps to keep the others flying.

**[1]** A wide-angle shot of the Tyndall flight line reveals two heritage-marked aircraft at left. **[2]** 82nd commander Lt. Col. J. D. Lee is briefed before a mission flying a QF-4. He flew operational F-16s. QF-16s are in the 82nd's future as the Phantom supply draws down. **[3]** Some of the test gear and dummy missiles carried by QF-4s, with a late-SEA marked aircraft. **[4]** Most tests are not fatal for the drone, and are flown to calibrate radars and provide a tracking target. Sometimes drones test munitions not yet deemed safe for operational aircraft to fire. The 82nd provides targets for surface-based air defense units from the other services, as well. **[5]** A SEA-marked Phantom, replete with shark mouth, along with one still wearing its unique two-tone gray scheme from the former Bergstrom AFB, Tex. **[6]** An F-4's tail hook is deployed in a systems check.





*[1] This manned QF-4 on final approach at Tyndall passes the “drone-way” runway used by unmanned targets, called NoLOs—for No Live Operators. The added distance from flight line operations affords a further degree of safety. [2] This weary Phantom’s squadron badges have all but disappeared. [3] Past meets*

*present: A SEA-marked QF-4 awaits taxi clearance as two F-22A Raptors take off. Tyndall is also home to the F-22 pilot schoolhouse. [4] The 82nd ATRS belongs to the 53rd Weapons Evaluation Group, an Air Combat Command organization. [5] The roundel indicates this tattered QF-4 once wore the European One*

*green paint scheme. [6] A sunset sortie over the Gulf of Mexico, this QF-4’s likely resting place. QRF-4C models are now being delivered, but the Phantom’s USAF career is slated to wind down in 2012, as the QF-16 begins to take its place as the primary realistic, full-scale target. ■*