

CONVERSION TO THE F-16

United States Air Forces in Europe also announced in late 1978 that the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing would conduct tests of the new F-16A, the Fighting Falcon, and subsequently would field the new aircraft. Arrangements for the tests began with arrival of the first of four teams in November 1978 and continued into 1979. Finally, a flight of four F-16s landed at Hahn on April 19, 1979, to begin testing the all-weather, multiple-role aircraft. Flight tests commenced the next day. Meanwhile, prompted by the news of its selection to receive the USAF's most advanced fighter,



The first two F-16s to arrive at Hahn AB, an F-16A on the left and F-16B on the right

the 50th began construction of the necessary facilities. In addition to aircraft shelters, hangars, and maintenance shops, the wing contracted the building of 300 additional housing units in communities surrounding Hahn Air Base. Air crews, meanwhile, focused on training under a new graduated combat capability program that provided specific training events and competency levels for each category of crew member. Maintenance personnel concentrated on learning F-16 specific requirements and adapted the Production Oriented Maintenance Organization to meet the needs of the new jets and mission.

Finally, on December 30, 1981, the 313th Tactical Fighter Squadron accepted the first of the wing's new Fighting Falcons. The aircraft had landed at Hahn the previous day, but was not accepted by the wing until the completion of a necessary "acceptance inspection"—a practice that continues today. Within six months, the last of the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing's F-4Es departed Hahn Air Base, ending the installation's 16-year association with that aircraft. During that time, the 50th's crews had logged

more than 176,300 flight hours in the Phantom II. A few weeks later, on July 9, 1982, a gala marked the addition of the Fighting Falcon to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's arsenal. The ceremony included displays of aircraft from Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark, as well as other countries in the NATO alliance.

For the next several months crews of the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing frequently deployed to Zaragoza Air Base, Spain, for several weeks at a time to conduct air-to-air and air-to-ground training designed to improve mission readiness and achieve fully operational status. The training conducted at Zaragoza included events designed to improve weapons delivery (bombing) accuracy, increase flying reliability (air crew performance), and to raise sortie production capability (ground crew performance). In April 1983, the wing commander, Colonel John M. Davey, reduced the frequency and duration of the training deployments and declared the squadrons operationally ready in air-to-air and air-to-ground roles.

Three months after Colonel Davey's pronouncement, the wing had the opportunity to demonstrate its combat readiness as it began its first United States Air Forces Europe Operational Readiness Inspection and North Atlantic Treaty Organization Tactical Evaluation in the F-16 Fighting Falcon. By this time, success in tactical evaluations and competitions had become familiar entries in the wing's history. The July 1983 tests were no exception. The wing's Fighting Falcon crews successfully completed assigned tasks, receiving a favorable evaluation score. Before the Thanksgiving holiday, the wing would add yet another line to its list of accomplishments. That opportunity arrived in October 1983, barely three months after the Operational Readiness Inspection, when the crews of the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing took their F-16s to the Air Force's annual worldwide bombing and gunnery competition—GUNSMOKE. The combined efforts of the air, maintenance, and weapons load crews led to the wing's selection as overall winner of the competition. Additionally, one of the wing's pilots earned the individual "Top Gun" award. Personnel of the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing continued to demonstrate their excellence when one of the wing's weapons load crews earned first place distinction among United States Air Forces Europe units and third place overall in an Air Force-wide competition at the end of 1983.

Operational activity by March 1984 reached nearly a fever pitch as the wing participated in several exercises and competitions, and prepared for a brief deployment. The wing joined GREEN FLAG exercises held at Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada, in March 1984. GREEN FLAG sought to provide realistic combat training with a heavy emphasis on electronic warfare. Crews faced a series of threat radars associated with missiles and antiaircraft artillery on their approach to, and egress from, targets and against which they had to employ countermeasures successfully. At Hahn Air Base, other wing personnel participated in a North Atlantic Treaty Organization exercise. On March 26, 1984, during this exercise, two F-16As of the 496th Tactical Fighter Squadron conducted the first emergency-procedures landings on an autobahn. The air crews landed, refueled from dispatched trucks, and launched from a highway near the German air base at Ahlhorn. Meanwhile, the wing also prepared for a large-scale deployment to several air bases, necessitated by programmed runway repairs at Hahn Air Base. To facilitate those repairs, aircraft and crews, maintenance specialists, and support personnel deployed to Ramstein and Spangdahlem Air Bases, as well as to West Germany's Pferdsfel Air Base, from April to June 1984.

The 50th Tactical Fighter Wing's growing list of accomplishments and recognition continued into 1985. In February, Headquarters, United States Air Forces in Europe named the wing as the recipient of the Category 1 Outstanding Unit Safety Award. Next, the wing received notice of its selection for an Air Force Outstanding Unit Award for the period July 1, 1982 through June 30, 1984. This was its fifth such award for the 50th and added to an impressive inventory of honors dating to the World War II activities of the 50th Fighter Group. In April 1985, the 313th Tactical Fighter Squadron learned of its selection for the United States Air Forces Europe Commander in Chief's Trophy (an award it first won only one year after its activation) for 1984, which recognized the most outstanding flying squadron in the command. At the annual GUNSMOKE competition, the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing's crews finished only two points behind the event's overall winner, achieving a second-place finish. So close was the competition that judges could not rely on camera scoring systems. Instead, they had to measure bomb placement to determine the winning team. Adding to the wing's

excellent performance, Captain Mark Fredenburgh earned the individual overall “Top Gun” trophy and the individual “Top Gun” award for F-16 wings.

The operational tempo did not slow in 1986, nor did the wing’s receipt of accolades and recognition from its headquarters. As the 50th replaced its still new F-16A and F-16B aircraft for the technologically advanced F-16C and F-16D, United States Air Forces Europe announced on April 15, 1986, that the 313th had earned the command’s Commander-in-Chief’s Trophy for the second consecutive year. Barely one month later, the wing’s integrated combat turn-around team garnered first place in United States Air Forces Europe’s munitions competition. The maintenance organizations’ proven prowess in numbered air force and major command competitions was an extension of its excellence in daily operations. As testimony to its achievements, in October 1986, Seventeenth Air Force selected the wing’s maintenance complex for the year’s Daedalian Maintenance Trophy. United States Air Forces in Europe followed suit in November 1986, choosing the 50th to represent the command at Air Force-level competition. Notification that the maintenance complex had won the Air Force Daedalian Maintenance Award arrived in April 1987. In May 1987, the wing learned of its selection for the Secretary of Defense’s Phoenix Award for 1986, which recognized the best maintenance organization in the Department of Defense. Individual maintenance squadrons also earned high-level recognition. The 50th Aircraft Generation Squadron received the United States Air Forces Europe Maintenance Effectiveness Award for 1986, and the 50th Component Repair Squadron was named best in Seventeenth Air Force.

Maintenance and operations units, however, were not the only squadrons to garner impressive awards. United States Air Forces in Europe named the 50th Supply Squadron’s Mission Capable Branch the best in the command for 1986. The wing’s Accounting and Finance Office received the Air Force’s Accounting and Finance Special Acts and Services Award and the Superior Performance Award. The wing’s life support function was named best in United States Air Forces Europe for 1986, and the wing earned both the command’s Foreign Object Damage Incentive Award and the Seventeenth Air Force Zero Foreign Object Damage Program Award. The 50th Transportation Squadron earned two distinguished awards for its programs in 1986--

best Traffic Management Office in United States Air Forces Europe and United States Air Forces Europe Motor Vehicle Maintenance Unit of the Year.

While notices of the wing's numerous awards continued to arrive in the spring of 1987, air crews and maintenance teams continued to reach new heights. During a training deployment to Zaragoza Air Base, Spain, the 10th Tactical Fighter Squadron surpassed Spangdahlem Air Base's five-year-old record for sustained surge, flying 956 sorties in 16 days. In July, United States Air Forces Europe hosted its first EXCALIBER bombing competition during which a pilot of the 313th Tactical Fighter Squadron won the individual "Top Gun" award. The wing placed second overall. Accolades continued throughout the year. In September, Seventeenth Air Force named the 50th Aircraft Generation Squadron and the 50th Component Repair Squadron as the best in the command and nominated the wing's Deputy Commander for Maintenance function for the Daedalian Award. Word that United States Air Forces Europe had chosen the wing to represent the command at the Air Force Daedalian competition arrived in December 1987 along with United States Air Forces Europe Maintenance Effectiveness Awards for the 50th Aircraft Generation and Component Repair Squadrons. In addition, the 50th Supply Squadron's Mission Capable Branch earned "Best in United States Air Forces Europe" honors for the second consecutive year, while the 50th Security Police Squadron's Peacekeeper Challenge teams placed first and second in the command competition.

As the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing entered its 35th year of association with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and United States Air Forces in Europe, few could have foreseen the changes that would soon alter the unit's future, and the world's. Colonel Roger C. Taylor assumed command of the wing on March 2, 1988, replacing Colonel Ben Nelson, Jr. Under Colonel Taylor's leadership, the wing continued its tradition of excellence. Operationally, wing personnel demonstrated that character during four SALTY NATION exercises, two NATO Tactical Evaluations, and a United States Air Forces Europe Operational Readiness Inspection, even as they continued training deployments to Zaragoza, Spain, and Incirlik, Turkey. During United States Air Forces Europe's EXCALIBER III, crews of the 313th Tactical Fighter Squadron earned top honors, as did the 313th Aircraft Maintenance Unit. Several months later, the 10th

Tactical Fighter Squadron placed first in EXCALIBER IV's low-angle bombing phase. Selection of the 313th Tactical Fighter Squadron's Captain William Morgan to fly the two-millionth hour in the F-16 added another highlight to the wing's scrapbook.

Assistance from a variety of support agencies, many of which participated in contests independent of the tactical squadrons, made the high operational tempo possible. The wing's weapons crews opposed 17 other United States Air Forces Europe bases during SURE FIRE competition from June 6-17, 1988, at Sembach Air Base, Germany. Again, the wing's teams took top honors. The distinguished service of the wing's maintenance community led to its selection in 1988 to test the Front-line Aircraft Maintenance Engineering program. Under this plan, selected military maintenance specialists received weapon-system-specific training to the same level as the Contractor Engineering and Technical Service representatives for that aircraft. The maintenance community ended the year on another high note when, in November 1988, the Explosive Ordnance Division received the Seventeenth Air Force Maintenance Effectiveness Award for its munitions maintenance activities.

The 50th Security Police Squadron also continued the wing's tradition of excellence. During the annual Peacekeeper Challenge in July, the wing's teams took first place in the M-16 marksmanship and obstacle course events. Amidst these activities, the wing also conducted four major accident response drills and underwent three Nuclear Surety Inspections. The results of these inspections helped justify the wing's receipt of special recognition from the Air Force's Directorate of Nuclear Surety.

As the men and women of the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing concluded 1988, pending changes filled the air. Events in Europe, from a series of aircraft accidents in West Germany to growing social, economic, and political uncertainty in the Soviet Bloc would dramatically alter the course toward the future. Pilots and maintenance personnel conducted aggressive training programs from Zaragoza, Spain and Incirlik, Turkey because of recent aircraft disasters in Germany. During the first three months of 1989, the wing's pilots flew 2,879 sorties from Zaragoza, Spain. This aggressive training program aided the 496th Tactical Fighter Squadron's pilots in EXCALIBER V, during which they received "Top Flight" honors. Working closely with the pilots, the squadron's aircraft maintenance unit won the Top Aircraft Maintenance Unit award

during the same competition—proof that the cohesiveness and expertise of the wing's air and ground crews and support personnel created a formidable opponent. Locally, men and women of the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing took part in SALTY NATION exercises, and underwent nuclear surety and unit effectiveness inspections.

By year's end, the social, economic, and political turmoil in the Soviet Union had resulted in the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the dawn of a new era in Europe. Former Soviet republics proclaimed their independence and right to self-determination. Quickly, talk in Germany turned to the possibility of reuniting East and West Germany. The Soviet Union, long considered the West's most formidable adversary, was in the throes of collapse. Debate followed on the future role of American forces in Europe, and worldwide change loomed imminent.

At Hahn Air Base, 1990 began with a siege of intense ice fog that hampered flight operations and air crew training. Implementation of previously developed plans to deal with such conditions, however, ensured the continuation of training deployments to Incirlik, Turkey. SALTY NATION exercises and more routine activities also continued, despite the inclement weather. On February 27, 1990, Colonel Roger C. Taylor relinquished command of the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing to Colonel George W. Norwood. Few, if any, knew then that Colonel Norwood would be the wing's last commander in Germany.

Throughout the spring and summer, the 50th Tactical Fighter Wing continued its aggressive training schedule. Meanwhile, American military and government officials debated the new role and structure of the armed forces in light of perceptions of a diminished threat to Western Europe. The changes brought about by events in the Soviet Union and in light of increasing public and governmental concern over the United State's increasing budget deficit. For many, the possibility of any combat activity seemed unlikely, but that perception changed almost in the blink of an eye during autumn 1990.